CRITICAL DISABILITY STUDIES

Rethinking the conventions for the age of postmodernity

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As one of the newer disciplines in academia, disability studies has seen a remarkable expansion and development in little more than two decades that has moved it decisively away from the rehabilitation studies that previously marked its effective limits to the status of an interdisciplinary subject that is as much at home with theory as with pragmatic solutions. It has become one of the places in which new ideas have evolved most rapidly, suggesting the kind of changes in ways of thinking that can have significant material effects in the everyday reality of people with disabilities. In recent years, the powerful emergence of what has come to be called critical disability studies (CDS) has added new force to the theoretical impetus already at the heart of the social model, taking it in innovative directions that challenge not simply existing doxa about the nature of disability, but questions of embodiment, identity and agency as they affect all living beings. As I understand it, CDS is of crucial importance, no longer as some kind of putatively marginal interest, but to scholarship as a whole. Just as feminism, post-coloniality and queer theory have all successfully pushed out the theoretical boat, CDS is now the academic site to watch. What is exciting about each of those areas is that they have forced us to rethink everything. It is no longer a case of just ‘adding on’ women or ethnic minorities to a pre-existing syllabus; the task is to ask how that changes our understanding of society in general. In the same way, a course on the philosophy or sociology of the body, for example, cannot simply consign disability issues to week 9, because any thoroughgoing consideration of the anomalous body introduces yet another arena of difference which once investigated has the capacity to change how we think about all sorts of other things. In short, our understanding of all bodies is affected once we take the difference of disability into account. CDS emphatically cannot be sidelined, then, as primarily the concern of those with disabilities: insofar as each of us, however we are embodied, is complicit in the construction and maintenance of normative assumptions, it challenges every one of us to rethink the relations between disabled and non-disabled designations – not just ethically as has long been the demand, but ontologically, right at the heart of the whole question of self and other.

My own involvement, working and writing in the field of disability studies on and off for about the last 15 years, has largely deployed what I term a postconventional analytic, which may seem somewhat unfamiliar to those who understand disability in terms of issues like rights, or who use the social model of disability as a starting point. The move towards postmodernism in CDS is often met with external scepticism, but just recently it has felt as though this is now the area where some of the most exciting new theoretical work is being done. The point is to deliberately shake up
some of our assumptions about disability and its historical antecedents by employing critique, not just as a way of challenging external forces, but as a method that contests the apparent verities of disability studies itself. It is Judith Butler, I think, who best captures the exciting opportunities that are mobilized by the use of critique in disability studies:

What [critique is] really about is opening up the possibility of questioning what our assumptions are and somehow encouraging us to live in the anxiety of that questioning without closing it down too quickly. Of course, it's not for the sake of anxiety that one should do it … but because anxiety accompanies something like the witnessing of new possibilities.

(quoted in Salih and Butler 2004: 331)

Butler of course has a reputation of being difficult – too postmodernist, too abstract – to be of much use in the substantive field of disability, but what I want to suggest is that her approach, and that of other postconventional thinkers like her, offers a newly productive way of thinking that has significant material application. We ignore the developments of postconventional theory and the changing environment of postmodernity at our peril – not because older models of understanding (notably the social model of disability) are wrong and should be replaced, but because we need to maximize the ways in which we can confidently develop our own agenda for CDS. In moving away from practice-based rehabilitation studies, disability studies – together with disability activism – has already made huge advances. But the issue I want to consider is whether socio-political gains and an increased understanding of the history and material conditions of disability are sufficient to the extent that it could be said that there is nothing more to be done. My claim is not that the postmodernist enquiry of CDS could ever provide final answers, but that, as Butler indicates, the work of critique is to keep alive the very process in which questioning itself generates new potential.

The initial question that must concern all those engaged with disability issues is why in the era of postmodernity, when multiple geopolitical insecurities are writ large and our individual expectations of the future are at best ambivalent, the societies of the global north should be so unsettled by non-normative forms of embodiment. As I put it elsewhere, 'for such anxieties to persist in the face of apparently more weighty global concerns speaks not to an over-investment in the local and individual, a kind of displaced anxiety even … but to the extraordinary significance of human corporeality' (Shildrick 2009: 1). What is striking in such societies is that the continuing discursive and material exclusion of disability coexists with concerted – and often effective – programmes of change that move towards the formal integration of disabled people into the standard rights, obligations and expectations of normative citizenship. To be perceived as differently embodied, however, is still to occupy a place defined as exceptional, rather than to simply be part of a multiplicity of possibilities. Despite the endlessly differential forms of human embodiment, the dominant discourse continues to mark some people – but not others – as inherently excessive to normative boundaries. Rather than simply continuing to base interventions on exploring how this happens, we should try to understand why – what it is that underlies and motivates the move of excluding others, – and that will entail utilizing and, where necessary, pushing to new limits all sorts of theoretical resources that take apart discourse as well as practice.

My contention is that disabled people continue to be the targets of widespread discrimination, oppression and alienation, not so much for their differences (both visible and hidden), but because their performitivity of embodied selfhood lays bare the psychosocial imaginary that sustains modernist understandings of what it is to be properly human. Perhaps the very notion of ‘properly human’ alone should give pause for thought, for that designation is precisely one that
is increasingly contested in the era of postmodernity. Nonetheless, given the challenged but enduring influence of the modernist logos, we should note that the valued attributes of personhood are autonomy, agency – which includes both a grasp of rationality and control over one’s own body – and a clear distinction between self and other. Clearly then, any compromise of mental or physical organization or stability, any indication of interdependency and material connectivity, grounds – for the normative majority – a deep-seated anxiety. The consequence, as we see in substantive effects every day in the lives of those who are anomalously embodied, is that difference is made other, rejected and devalued by those who are able to broadly align themselves with the illusory standards of the psychosocial imaginary. As such it is easier to see that the conventional demands for an extension and solidification of rights for disabled people, and for a more inclusive culture, fall short of a more radical move that would shake up not just law, policy and socio-cultural relations, but would contest the very nature of the standards that underpin their normative operation. In order to move forward, it is necessary to investigate more deeply what it is that continues to impede the evolution of equitable conditions of possibility.

Such a mode of thinking marks what is often termed critical disability studies, a relatively recent development that is broadly aligned with a postconventional theoretical approach. Its purpose is both to extend into new territory the existing achievements of more modernist paradigms of disability like the social model, and where necessary to productively critique the limitations of such models. While CDS should never lose sight of its own history, it must consciously engage with all the theoretical resources available to it, whether from feminism, postmodernism, queer theory, critical race theory or long-established perspectives like the phenomenology of the body and psychoanalysis. Such committed interdisciplinarity in a postconventional vein is still relatively unexplored in published work, particularly in the United Kingdom (UK), where the social model has long held sway but there are signs that it is beginning to open up. The way forward was in part evident in Corker and Shakespeare’s edited collection Dis/ability/Postmodernism (2002), which consciously set out to introduce new ways of thinking about the disabled body. Although not fully transdisciplinary, the book offered a whole-hearted endorsement of the value of, at least, a soft postmodernist lens in understanding the status, meaning and practices of disability. In the preceding years, many individual scholars had been developing their own contestation of the modernist paradigms that underlay disability studies, but the new collection represented a radical shift that greatly increased the range of critique whilst enthusiastically engaging with new theoretical models more suited, perhaps, to the fast-changing landscape of the twenty-first century. More recently, Dan Goodley’s book Disability Studies (2011), which provides an introductory overview of the whole field that takes on board a much broader critique than usual, has made the case for non-specialists, while my own work – and especially Dangerous Discourses (Shildrick 2009) – attempts to stir up the interlinked issues of sexuality and subjectivity in the terms of such discourses as Lacanian psychoanalysis and Deleuzian assemblages. In turning to what I class as postconventional approaches, the elements to stress are a new focus on the significance of embodiment; an awareness of the workings of the cultural imaginary; a deconstruction of binary thought in favour of the fluidity of all categories; and a recognition that emotion and affect are as important as the material aspects of life.

Before looking into those aspects more closely, it is instructive to ask what comprises the category of disability, which marks out one major contemporary location of what I have referred to as anomalous embodiment (Shildrick 2002). Although some form of definitive answer is often called for, and given, it is one that those working within a postconventional framework are particularly reluctant to provide. The setting out of any fixed parameters or definitional boundaries has long been resisted by disability scholarship as unnecessarily reductive – and perhaps only
Critical disability studies

the medical model has attempted such a categorization – but for recent theorists, the demand
would speak to a desire to close down and thus normalize what otherwise remains a shifting nexus
of both physical and mental states that resists final domestication. What qualifies as a disability in
any case varies greatly according to the socio-historical and geopolitical context, and even in a
single location the designation remains stubbornly multi-faceted and resistant to definition in
terms of both its boundaries and meanings. As is clear from Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s
summary of just some of the considerations, conventional binary thinking – either this or that –
cannot capture the rich interweaving of bodily states that constitute a more nuanced approach to
the question of difference:

Disability is an overarching and in some ways artificial category that encompasses
congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illnesses and retardation, chronic
and acute illnesses, fatal and progressive diseases, temporary and permanent injuries, and
a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks,
unusual proportions, or obesity. … The physical impairments that render someone
‘disabled’ are almost never absolute or static; they are dynamic, contingent conditions
affected by many external factors and usually fluctuating over time.

(Garland Thomson 1997: 13)

For all its complexity, Garland Thomson’s list outlines here solely physical as opposed to cognitive
developmental disabilities. Moreover, what further and necessarily complicates the picture are the
many other intersectional concerns – such as those of ethnicity, age, class, sexuality, gender and
more – that impact on the experience and significance of any disabled state.

The self-evident reality of such complex variation, nonetheless, has not prevented the kind of
reductive universalizing approach that speaks of disability as a single classification, although to a
certain extent – where the simplification is internal to disability politics rather than imposed
from the outside – there might be some strategic justification. In order to make the strong point
that those with disabilities are ‘othered’, reference must clearly be made to the binary structures
that support all modern societies of the global north. For that reason, ‘the contestation of ableist
attitudes, values and politics will often set aside intricate differential considerations in the face of
strategic necessity’ (Shildrick 2009: 3). The apparent strength to mount a socio-political challenge
to existing normativities often resides in the extent to which an identity politics is adopted,
signalling a self-defined and unified group identity and the capacity to voice a common cause,
even at the expense of marginalizing actual internal differences. A period of identity politics is
heavily associated with most movements that stand against the mainstream, and real changes are
often procured; the drawback is that minority interests within – unconventional forms of sexual
expression for example – are once again silenced. As Donna Haraway reminded feminists facing
similar problems, the ‘dream of a common language …, of perfectly faithful naming of experience,
is a totalizing and imperialist one’ (Haraway 1991: 173). What she recommended in place of
identity politics was the pursuit of temporary and partial affinities, ad hoc alliances that would give
leverage to socio-political claims without solidifying and policing the reductive coils of sameness
and difference. The very diversity of disabilities demands a similarly sensitive temporal approach
that recognizes broad overlapping interests but refuses the putative safety of naming oneself as a
member of a fixed and bounded category. Speaking of disability in theoretical terms, then, must
both respond to, and critique, the power and simplicity of binary thinking. To postmodernist
thinkers, the dominance of the binary may be based on an illusion, but its operation is all too real.
What matters is that we recognize that the essential challenge to the damaging effects of opposi-
tional binaries is not the limit of what is either possible or necessary. Indeed, Haraway herself,
although not writing of disability as such, indicates an alternative way forward based precisely on the extravagance of corporeal possibility. She writes:

How can our ‘natural’ bodies be reimagined – and relived – in ways that transform the relations of same and different, self and other, inner and outer, recognition and misrecognition into guiding maps for inappropriate/d others? And inescapably, these refiligurings must acknowledge the permanent condition of our fragility, mortality, and finitude.  

(Haraway 1991: 3–4)

The issues at stake here are twofold and ultimately related. The first is that while most of us concerned with disability studies may already have an enriched understanding of the multiple subdivisions of human morphology, the further point is that the parameters around all and any types of embodiment – and not just disabling conditions – are in any case uncertain. In the postconventional approach, all putative categories are slippery, unfixed, permeable, deeply intersectional, intrinsically hybrid and resistant to definition. Second, whilst recognizing that what exactly constitutes the ‘otherness’ of those assigned to the category of disability is hard to identify, we should remember that the binary distinction between disabled and non-disabled is itself vulnerable to deconstruction. Lennard Davis (2002), for example, catches one highly significant aspect of the issue when he points to the instability of disability as ‘a subset’ of the wider instability of all identities in the era of postmodernity, while Henri-Jacques Stiker points out that the disabled ‘are the tear in our being that reveals its open-endedness, its incompleteness, its precariousness’ (1999: 10). In short, although the boundary that separates those who count as able bodied from those who are marked as disabled is both deeply influential and taken for granted in modernist thought, neither of those terms is as self-evident as it appears. Indeed, I would argue that the separation and distinction between diverse forms of embodiment is at best an expedience, and at worst a violent imposition of epistemic and/or material power. The challenge of such a view is that it undermines the seductive lure of identity politics that has seemed to offer the most socio-political impact, not least to disability activism. By complicating the liberal humanist claim that, like other identifiable oppressed groups, disabled people should simply be afforded the same rights and benefits enjoyed by mainstream members of their society, critical theorists acknowledge both the notion of multiple irreducible differences, and the indistinction of boundaries in a way that problematizes the whole notion of categorical clarity. In other words, the status of both disabled and able bodied designations is at best provisional rather than marking a fixed identity.

At a superficial level, it is a truism that any individual may experience unexpected accidental trauma, the loss of capacity through illness, or simply the processes of ageing that can result in any one of us crossing the boundary between one category and another and acquiring the label of disability. The use of the term ‘temporarily able bodied’ (TAB) to express this insight has become ubiquitous in disability discourse. Nonetheless I find such an explanation of the limits of the central binary of disabled and non-disabled deeply inadequate, and scarcely likely to shake the epistemic certainty with which that binary is habitually deployed. What is more important is to uncover the imbrication within difference that destabilizes the normative notion that there is a clear distinction between forms of embodiment. The issue, for me, is not only that the mainstream model of TAB can only envisage an individual falling away from what remains a dominant, normative standard, but that it shows no recognition of either the material or psychic intercorporeality that underlies our relations with others. If we ask why disability should be so unsettling, so productive of anxiety, it is surely because it speaks not to some absolute difference between the experience of disabled and non-disabled forms of embodiment, but rather to a deeply
disconcerting insinuation of commonality. Henri-Jacques Stiker puts it at its most provocative and personal when he comments: ‘Each of us has a disabled other who cannot be acknowledged’ (Stiker 1999: 8). Or as Thomas Couser notes: ‘Part of what makes disability so threatening to the non-disabled then may be precisely the indistinctness and permeability of its boundaries’ (Couser 1997: 178). As poststructuralism has made clear, the modernist confidence in the separation of self and other cannot hold.

The point arising from such an analysis is that, while there may be a strategic necessity, it cannot be sufficient to put in place formal structures of equality to ameliorate the discrimination and oppression that disabled people face worldwide. That is not to deny that many pragmatic aspects of living with a disability can and do benefit from an approach focused on changes in law and social policy, but rather to draw attention to the limits of the equality model in terms of both the embodiment of difference and the anxiety that disability is so clearly capable of generating. In consequence, I have reservations about the efficacy of the social constructionist model of disability (SMD), and believe that an investigation into both the phenomenological experience of the disabled body and into the psychosocial dimensions of what mobilizes normative exclusions would yield a deeper understanding of the issues at stake. To summarize briefly, what the SMD importantly insists on is that the major ‘problem’ of disability is located not in the marginalized individual but within the normative structures of mainstream society. In relatively recent years, the North American and the UK disability movements have decisively rejected the biomedical discourse of disability as an individual pathology of physical or cognitive development and embraced an understanding that the condition is socially constructed. The determined promotion of the SMD has resulted in considerable material gains for disabled people insofar as many countries have passed dedicated legislation that undercuts discrimination and undoubtedly leads to a more inclusive organization of social life. Whilst grounding a revalorization of people with disabilities, however, the changes do not necessarily contest the underlying attitudes, values and subconscious prejudices and fears that ground a persistent, albeit often unspoken, intolerance. In other words, in the psychosocial imaginary, morphological imperfection is still disavowed. The response, then, must go beyond simply extending the formal framework in which disabled people can maximize their status as good citizens of the neo-liberal polity, but must seek ways of first critiquing and then transforming the nature of those entrenched and scarcely acknowledged obstacles to fundamental change. Insofar as each of us – whatever our individual form of embodiment – is complicit in the maintenance of the psychosocial imaginary, what is required is both a recognition of just why disability appear so threatening to the normative majority, and a re-imagining of the potentialities of bodily difference. Whether we choose to focus on who is to count as a subject or on something like the experience of sexuality, the ethical task is to mobilize both discursive analysis and substantive intervention, each of which can demonstrate the capacity of disabled embodiment to perform a radical queering of normative paradigms.

What, then, are the implications of such a perspective? The identification of any disruption to the perceived stability of normative expectations both mounts a direct challenge to the attitudes and values of mainstream society and constitutes a critique of the model of disability politics that primarily sets out to reform what is identified as an oppressive external social structure. What CDS intends is to unsettle entrenched ways of thinking on both sides of the putative divide between disabled and non-disabled, and to offer an analysis of how and why certain definitions are constructed and maintained. Given that none of us stand outside the discursive conventions of our specific time and place, this is no simple task; whatever our relation to disability, we are all deeply influenced at both conscious and subconscious levels by a characteristically modernist conception of the world. It is as though all knowledge and experience were grounded in binary opposites that would unproblematically figure a socio-politics of inclusion or exclusion, and that
identification with one category rather than the other is an inevitable step that requires no further analysis. To be aligned with normative forms of embodiment automatically and naturally entitles one to a range of external goods, benefits and advantages, while to be named as disabled signals a marginalization that can only be countered by the strength of unified resistance and a claim to access what is denied. The struggle for equal opportunities in jobs, education, transport and so on, may be stubbornly resisted, but it is one in which the participants on either side of the have/have not divide ‘know their place’ in the binary hierarchy and can speak and act from it as though the problematic were wholly resolvable at the structural level. The losses and gains from any confrontation may entail some reformulation of categorical assumptions, but the fundamental binary of disabled/non-disabled is undisturbed. As Wendy Brown points out, ‘rights are never deployed “freely”, but always within a discursive, hence normative context’ (2002: 422).

When it comes to experiential and affective issues like subjectivity and sexuality, moreover, it is even less possible to see the problematic in such clear-cut terms. Both areas are highly productive of anxiety precisely because they disorder normative assumptions and generate demands, not so much for structural reform as for a transformation in the meaning of selfhood, not only for those who are anomalously embodied but, by extension, for every one of us. As soon as the other moves beyond simple binary opposition and refuses to stay in place, the implications of change affect the whole relation. By and large, in seeing the negative status of disability as externally-based in the discriminatory social procedures, the SMD has been unconcerned with subjectivity, and slow to put sexuality on the agenda. A social constructionist understanding of disability simply assumes that there is some core pre-given subject waiting to be empowered. The argument is where disabled people have been treated in the past as passive objects of concern, rather than as autonomous subjects, the socio-political approach will be effective in demanding the recognition of independent agency. But just as feminism has painfully learned to question its own founding assumptions about equality, disability studies too needs to ask whether demands for recognition within the existing system – as though the problem were no more than one of material exclusion – is an adequate response. For poststructuralists, in any case, the subject is no longer seen as a stable, grounding category that can be taken for granted, but as a discursive construction, which indicates that all sorts of epistemic, ontological and ethical claims must be rethought (Shildrick 1997). In similar ways, the notion of masculinity has been problematized by critical cultural and queer theory to the extent that CDS acknowledges the need to complicate the socio-political assertion that disabled people have the same rights as others to sexual identity and expression. Given that unmanaged sexuality always already has the propensity to threaten the efficient organization of social relations – a threat greatly amplified in the context of the anxiety-provoking disabled body – then we need to uncover which psychosocial factors are in play and what is the nature of the boundaries that are vulnerable to transgression.

My argument is that all of us – regardless of our own individual morphology – are participants in the socio-cultural imaginary that pervasively shapes the disposition of everyday attitudes and values – and we all therefore have a responsibility to interrogate it. The implication is that the view that only disabled people themselves have a right to speak authoritatively with regard to disability must be rethought. The attraction of standpoint theory is that it openly privileges the lived experience and knowledge of those at the centre of a specific problematic, and gives a voice to those who may previously have been unheard, whether they be women, black people or people with disabilities. What standpoint theory promotes is a hierarchy of truth telling in which the oppressed uncover a suppressed reality while those who are dominant – effectively historic oppressors of all kinds – speak only a limited discourse that reflects their own ideological interests. This interpretation is in part supported by Foucault’s assertion that power does indeed construct a very biased and incomplete form of knowledge but, as he (1980) also makes plain, the partiality of
discourse does not imply the existence of some absolute truth that could, under the right conditions, be accessed. In contemporary feminist thinking, the implausibilities of standpoint theory have largely led to its demise as a mode of analysis, only for it to reappear in disability theory and practice. Clearly the promotion of voices that have been historically subjugated – what Foucault calls ‘the great anonymous murmur of discourses’ (Foucault 1989: 27) – is a good thing, but not to the extent of claiming a categorical authority that puts in question the validity of any account proposed by those who are defined as non-disabled. Indeed, I would argue strongly that they are the ones – and I include myself here – who have the weightiest responsibility in the matter, not to speak on behalf of, or to pre-empt the experience of, others unlike themselves, but to interrogate precisely their own cultural and psychosocial location as non-disabled (Marks 1999, Shildrick 2009).

To recap, what I understand by CDS is an approach marked by a true transdisciplinarity and an openness to a plethora of resources that are not commonly seen as relevant to the concerns of mainstream disability studies. Although simply conflating our specific parameters of inquiry with other arenas of difference, like those of race or gender, would be damagingly reductive, there are, I believe, sufficient overlaps in the respective discursive constructions to justify some strategic responses in common. If the aim is critique, then it calls for the utilization – and sometimes deliberate deformation – of multiple elements of feminist, queer, poststructuralist and postmodernist theory in order to disrupt the conventional meanings of the terms associated with disability, including those of subjectivity, and sexuality. Underlying each of those inherently resistant discourses is a retheorization of the question of difference that entails a radical shift from the modernist privileging of an autonomous and stable self to the postmodernist contention that the self is always embodied, dependent on its others, unsettled, and always in process. To mobilize such a critique signifies not the search for some successor theory, but a way of holding open theoretical conjunctions that are potentially contradictory in meaning and original intent. The goal is not to construct a universal theory, but to position disability as figuring an irreducible provocation to the normative desire, evident in the psychosocial imaginary, for stability and certainty about what it means to be human. The far from modest question that underlies the enterprise of CDS is: what it would mean, ontologically and ethically, to reimagine dis/ability as the very condition of human becoming? The task at the level of embodiment is to explore how and why the disabled body – the body that falls outside modernist conventions – already disorders the power of prevailing socio-cultural normativities. In place of modernist stereotypes that construct an insidious devaluation of bodily difference, and of disabled people, postconventional theories of embodiment expose the uncertain and vulnerable nature of all forms of embodied selfhood. Where once the post-Enlightenment sovereign subject, who relies on the exclusionary strategies separation and distinction, seemed secure, the emergence of first Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and later the theory of performativity have been prominent in showing how the privileging of some forms of embodiment to the detriment of others might be productively disturbed.

My purpose is not to suggest that such disruption is a unique feature of postmodernity, although the particular theoretical framework of postmodernism embraces such disturbance as central to ontological and epistemological knowledge. As both Foucault (2003) and Henri-Jacques Stiker (1999) have shown, a genealogy of the disabled body will always disrupt the notion of a progressive and sequential development of ideas, and uncover instead a series of contradictory, splintered and non-teleological discourses firmly embedded in particular socio-historical locations. Where mainstream disability studies has relied on a narrative of progressive transformations of meaning – from early Judaic biblical models of impurity to a dominant biomedical approach that pathologizes the disabled body, and more recently to the SMD analysis that has politicized the
problematic – CDS works with a far more messy, disorganized and insecure set of indicators. As Stiker shows, we can identify a thoroughgoing governmentality at the heart of policy initiatives – as with rehabilitation programmes or the use of prosthetics – that indicate they are never as positively progressive as they claim or may seem. Like the critical legal theory of Wendy Brown which shows how rights-based claims to equality arising from a liberal recognition of the exclusionary nature of the modernist model of sovereign selfhood are double-edged, holding out material gains only at the cost of assimilation to normative standards, Stiker is fully cognisant of the danger of normalization strategies that cover over difference. As he notes: ‘Paradoxically, [disabled people] are designated in order to be made to disappear, they are spoken in order to be silenced’ (Stiker 1999: 134). His warning has direct relevance to the recent claims to ‘sexual citizenship’, which have been strongly promoted within disability politics (Shakespare et al. 1996; Siebers 2008; Rogers 2009). The issue of who counts as a sexual subject is highly cogent insofar as the sexuality of disabled people is both highly regulated and invalidated or silenced completely (Shildrick 2009), but it remains to ask whether sexual citizenship is an effective objective. As I understand it, the move neither radically contests nor transforms the current neo-liberal understanding of sexuality, but simply attempts to buy into the normative order and thus fails to break with the devaluation of difference.6

We must not forget that beyond the insistent operations of governmentality that mark contemporary society, there is also a level of interior, even subconscious meanings given to disability. Where a Foucauldian analysis speaks to the ubiquitous forms of the self/other binary, a more specifically deconstructive approach reveals the other to be an interior element of the embodied self. Consequently, a more nuanced understanding of the materialization of normative constructions of disability supplements the Foucauldian approach by engaging with the psycho-social elements that constitute the western imaginary. With specific regard to the pleasure and danger of sexuality and erotic desire, for example, a psychoanalytic approach would ask what part the links between desire, lack and anxiety play in frustrating a positive model of disability and sexuality. Although many disability theorists have been justifiably wary of psychoanalysis and its use as a tool of opppression, others are increasingly turning to it in recognition that the perspective may offer an important and resistant mode of understanding (Wilton 2003; Shildrick 2009; Goodley 2011). At its heart is the conviction that our apparent psychic and bodily integrity is never given, but is an ongoing process, constantly open to disruptions from within in terms of both stable body image and self-identity, and always risking the irruption of anxiety, especially with regard to sexuality. Building in particular on Lacan’s rereading of Freud, which traces the gradual emergence in the Symbolic of a putatively coherent (sexual) subject, we need to ask what has been repressed in order to achieve the illusion of unity and order, and which forms of embodied subjectivity cannot come into being because their antecedents in the Real are already too disruptive? The psychoanalytic approach offers some powerful insights into the socio-cultural denial of desire and sexual identity to people with disabilities, and more generally it provides a convincing account of the normative anxiety that surrounds the whole subject of disabled embodiment. As a tool for further understanding normative responses, psychoanalysis is extremely valuable and signals where resistance might lie, but what it cannot fully do is provide a positive model of disability in all its aspects. For that, queer theory, and particularly its extension into Deleuzian theory, is considerably more productive.

Contemporary disability scholars such as Tremain (2000), Sherry (2004) and McRuer (2006) increasingly deploy queer theory with the aim of opening up the question of how anomalous embodiment in all its forms can be seen as inherently transgressive. In place of a Foucauldian model of governmentality, or an alternative psychoanalytic model based on the notion of lack – each of which adds to our understanding of the challenge disability makes to normativity – a queer
reading of the performativity of desire, especially in a Deleuzian sense, offers an affirmative account of disability. For Deleuze and Guattari (1984, 1987), the concept of desire is greatly extended to encompass its meaning, not just as a component of specifically sexual being, but as an element of self-becoming that permeates all aspects of what it means to live in the world. Desire enables a productive positivity that leaves behind the normal/abnormal binary to mobilize instead the ungovernable energies and intensities that emanate from a series of unrestrained and often unpredictable conjunctions. Where other models are engaged with the contested boundaries of self and other, the Deleuzian tool box facilitates a move beyond conventional distinctions and separations between whole and ‘broken’ bodies, or between the organic and non-organic. The conditions of possibility are transformed, and one immediate outcome is that neither the disabled body in general nor the prostheticized body are excluded from discourses of pleasure and desire. Rather the disabled body could be seen as paradigmatic, not of the autonomous subject at the heart of modernist discourse, but of the profound interconnectivity of all embodied social relations. In Deleuzian terms, we are all interdependent, and come together and break apart in unpredictable energies and flows of desire (Grosz 1995; Gibson 2006). To rely on a wheelchair for mobility, a prosthetic limb for balance, or a human assistant for daily tasks, is to be engaged in assemblages that always exceed the individual and her capacities. In the era of the postmodernity, where the liberal humanist subject is displaced by the posthuman, corporeal variation is an unlikely justification for devaluation or exclusion. The overriding point, however, is that indeterminacy and instability are not unique to the anomalous body but stand as the conditions of all corporeality in as much as the finality and integrity of the normative subject are merely features of a phantasmatic structure. As such, the ‘disabled’ body signals not some exceptional lack or failure, but simply one mode among multiple ways of becoming. Once corporeal integrity loses its privilege in the era of postmodernity, and is seen as no more than a provisional mode of embodiment, then modernist anxieties around non-normative morphology become signs of a pointless nostalgia.

In conclusion, I want to set out some ambitious claims for critical disability theory that highlight its efficacy and even its inevitability. Where feminism, postcolonial studies and queer theory have in the recent past all helped us to think and therefore act differently, I believe that CDS can now take up that task. Given the widespread oppression of disabled people perpetuated in many societies globally, it is clear that disability poses probing questions about the nature of those societies, not only with regard to their overt organization but also in terms of their psychosocial imaginaries. The responsibility for enquiry and analysis falls on all those who participate in the relevant structures, and just as racism has been identified as a problem of whiteness, so too (dis)ableism must be addressed both by those who are identified with normative standards, and by those who are excessive to them. By taking on a range of contemporary critical theories and asking what difference they can make to the othering of disabled people, no single perspective is privileged above others. At the same time, whole new areas, like that of sexuality, which had been previously sidelines as politically inessential, have been opened up to scrutiny, and deconstructive inquiry has been directed inward as well as engaging with external materialities. As I indicated at the beginning of the chapter, the key to the new scholarship is critique, not in the sense of the destruction of old certainties, but as a bold and risky enterprise that subjects all the conventions to potentially disruptive analyses. This is no empty scholarly game, but a necessary move that recognizes that as limit cases certain bodies – monstrous bodies and disabled bodies – clearly demonstrate the inadequacy of conventional models of embodied selfhood as self-sufficient and in control. To take the path of CDS and to rethink the operative conditions under the gaze of postconventional critique is bound to generate controversy, but ultimately it is a move of high ethical responsibility.
We are left, then, with an important ethical question: how can we engage with morphological difference that is not reducible to the binary of either sameness or difference? What should be the response to those who cannot be assigned to either the category of those others who are absolutely not-like-us, or to the category of those who can be reclaimed or normalized, or made like us. As long as the anomalous body remains the absolute other, it is so distanced by its difference, its not-me-ness, that it is no threat. Once, however, it begins to resemble those who lay claim to the primary term of identity, or to reflect back aspects of ourselves that we don’t usually acknowledge, then its indeterminate status – as neither wholly self nor absolutely other – becomes deeply disturbing. If we are to have an ethically responsible encounter with corporeal difference, then, we need a strategy of queering the norms of embodiment, a commitment to deconstruct the apparent stability of distinct and bounded categories. We need to remind ourselves that the embodied self is always vulnerable, and that the normative parameters of the embodied subject as defined within modernist discourse are based on an illusion. Perhaps if there were more recognition that there is no single acceptable mode of embodiment, and that all bodies are unstable and vulnerable, then rather than being labelled as deficient, the bodies that are further from normative standards would be revalued as simply different. The way forward is far from clear, but my hope and expectation is that, in its commitment to deepening conceptual frameworks, CDS has begun to engage with just the kind of critical thinking that throws new ontological, epistemological and ethical questions into relief.

Notes

1. The terminology around disability is highly contested, not least around the naming of those who putatively occupy the category. The current preference within both CDS, and some but no means all activists circles, is for ‘disabled people’ rather than ‘people with disabilities’, although even then, practice may vary between the UK and the United States. The term ‘people with disabilities’ was initially promoted to signal a break with older and more evidently stigmatizing terms such as handicapped, retarded, crippled, and so on. Other supposedly more positive designations such as differently-abled, physically challenged or special needs have fallen from favour, and the use of so-called people-first language forms is now seen as failing to encompass the significance of disability (Overboe 1999; Titchkosky 2006), treating it as more as a contingent add-on than a fundamental element in the production of identities. Nonetheless, ‘people with disabilities’ remains in widespread use among disabled and non-disabled people alike, and some academic journals make it mandatory. On either side such policing seems unnecessarily divisive, and in any case chases after the illusion of perfect terminology that will not in time become marked by ongoing prejudices and anxieties. Accordingly, although I prefer ‘disabled person’ as more adequate to denoting the process of embodiment, I use its alternative wherever it seems contextually more appropriate.

2. The imaginary is the fictive (non)location where multiple projections and identifications work to shape dominant corporeal, categorical and socio-cultural formations. It is the locus in which what count as normal and abnormal are held apart.

3. See Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) for their assessment of the significance of the term ‘critical’. It is not entirely clear when the discipline of critical disability studies first appeared as such, but certainly York University, Toronto established an MA – and subsequently PhD – programme in it in 2003.

4. Even as I complete this chapter, the UK coalition government is attempting to reverse the gains of recent years and reimpose simple binary – and broadly medicalized – definitions of disability that better allow its management within a welfare system. In the neo-liberal state, the desire to domesticate – and thus eliminate the troublesome excessiveness of morphological anomaly – is reinvigorated in the service of socio-economic governance.


6. This critique is more fully developed in Shildrick (forthcoming).

7. Given the hierarchies of difference that operate within disability, where those with physical conditions may feel superior to those with developmental and intellectual disabilities – not the mention the myriad subtle nuances within each form – the question concerns all of us, and not just the normative majority.
Critical disability studies

Bibliography


