



**Bridges to the New Millennium:
Spanning Differences in Differing Streams
of Disability Issues**

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“Straddling two worlds” is an expression commonly voiced by marginalized people. Many African Americans, for example, feel they must act “white” to succeed in social or business environments. Likewise, many immigrants will complain of the conflict that assimilation demands. It is as if they are told to “adopt *our* ways, and reject the customs, dress, and language of your (inferior) native culture.” Many career-oriented women, too, have noted how difficult it is to straddle two worlds - to “think like a man” at work, but switch to traditionally female roles in other contexts. With one leg in mainstream culture, and the other planted in performative expectations of one’s national heritage, familiar religion, or proscribed sexuality, it is easy to find one’s equilibrium de-centered, one’s progress belabored, one’s self-concept torn in two.

Disabled persons seeking participation in the dominant culture are similarly aware that, because of societal attitudes toward “deviant” physiques or intellects or behaviorisms, they are often required to straddle two or more worlds. Sometimes we are able to “pass” as “normal” - at the expense of a vital aspect of identity, not to mention our health if such “passing” requires us to overextend our energies. For other disabled people, the wish to affiliate solely with peers (such as some members of the Deaf culture might attempt, through self-segregation) often means having to reject much of mainstream life in order to keep the “straddling” to a minimum. Because disabled people are expected to “normalize” and to assimilate, in ways no less identity-shattering than what minorities, immigrants, and women have experienced, it is not uncommon to recognize that not

only is it difficult to adapt to two worlds, but we feel at home in neither.

I remember receiving my passport (deportation notice?) for DisabilityLand in 1972, the day a team of pediatricians and neurologists diagnosed me as mother-of-a-"handicapped"-child. Reluctant to abandon all that was familiar in my homeland of Hegemonia, I managed for many years to live with a bifurcated identity. There were moments when I felt like a tourist in what had been my native territory; and there were times that I felt chilled to my soul when I dipped a tentative toe in Disability waters. I belonged - but did not belong - to either world. I was captive in the experience of disability, but landlocked in an ableist perspective. This balancing act so sapped my energies and unsettled my values system that I sought refuge in a third space, a mental island of withdrawal. Here in self-exile, I recognized comrades, other parents of "the handicapped." To see us lined up in therapy waiting rooms or doctors' offices was to glimpse the zombie-like blankness of recent Holocaust victims or prisoners of war. According to the literature I read *now*, thirty years later, we unconventional parents had undergone "autobiographical disruption," and "diagnostic shock" (Frank); and the societal consequences of our children's impairments continued to tilt our identities so far off-balance that we were each near our "limit situation," in danger of "fall[ing] into irreversible misfortune" (Gadamer 78). Self-exile was clearly no less-perilous than straddling two worlds had been.

The answer, for me, took almost thirty years to reveal itself. Two years ago, I ventured into cyberspace and became aware of the "social" model of disability. The resonant chord this perspective struck in me was of such force that I again lost "autobiographical" footing, was shoved off-balance by a new reality. This time, though, in shifting my weight, I stopped straddling different worlds: within a few months, I defected from ElitesVille, struggled to learn the "foreign" language of Disability Rights, and even swam (well, flew) to the scholarly shores inhabited by "social Model" theorists. The British Isles were, I believed (judging from the number of English accents I had "heard" while surfing the Internet) some kind of El Dorado, where ableism had been all but drowned, where the "crips" ruled the land, and where ableism was nothing more than a sputtering fountain of capitalist construction.

I spent nine great months in Britain interviewing professors and students on different campuses in the UK and meeting with representatives of disability-rights organizations and parents' groups. Then I reluctantly re-entered my homeland to read and reflect on disability in my own country and elsewhere. Suddenly I realized that El Dorado was not just an British vision. It was being explored by nations all around the globe: we Yanks (and Canadians and Australians and other English-speaking writers) also knew a thing or two about disability. The problem was that in our synchronic discoveries of a "New World" for disability, each country gave explorers' rights to a certain discipline with a specific *telos* so that dozens of territorial flags were planted in haste without anyone bothering to read the maps drawn by other explorers. As noted disability-scholar Vic Finkelstein says, "Today, we are faced with a plethora of professions and academic disciplines, each of which jealously defends its own territory" (e-mail, 15 Aug. 1999).

DisabilityLand is a reality, and its population grows in direct proportion to the advertisements for a new model that represents a vehicle to independence; but industry seems confined solely to the remanufacture of this Social Model. It has been redesigned endlessly, according to individuals' visions. Each time it is introduced, it is received with as much fanfare as the first wheel, celebrated for its roundness or sturdiness or wheelness. Scholars write about it, other scholars critique those writings, and everyone jealously guards their own blueprints, secured inside the vaults of their own department or university, or within national boundaries. Meanwhile, fraternities of nonacademics reinvent the model in other ways, using their personal narratives or collectively protesting policies that further oppress them. Politicians, too, redesign the model to fit their agendas. Yet, nowhere is real dialectic going on, where a team of model-experts might consult with designers or other workers on the ground floor, and invite consumers to join the discussion, so as to arrive at a consensus of the best methods for making wheels - from joining common spokes to

assembling wood with iron - or even to discuss possibilities of adding more wheels, to build a conveyance on which a whole community could ride.

We are where we are at today because of the way we have been thinking: individually, separately, competitively. While we may know the wheel inside and out, we have not made a vehicle of it, nor have we helped design the roads on which it may travel. Collaboration at the design stage, after it was agreed that we had a patent-worthy model, might have helped the disability "movement" to actually *move*, to act, to change society by building bridges from DisabilityLand to Main Street, USA (or to the *Champs Elysees* or Piccadilly Square, to the land "Down Under," or to North Montreal). But even now, co-construction of those bridges is resisted.

This issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* was born of frustration. I may be the "new kid on the block," but I think a lot of us want to see the writers and their respective departmental- and national ethos-structures actually collude in the creation of a method for our movement, beyond the metatheory which cannot withstand much more recycling. Or, failing to construct a definitive method, might there at least be a more generous cross-pollination within the field of Disability Studies so that more people are aware of and can participate in the good work going on? I relate to the dream expressed by Hans-Georg Gadamer when he writes:

[M]y own deepest hope is that from the *shared inheritance* which is gradually being built up for us from all the different human cultures across the globe, we might eventually learn how to recognize our needs and address our difficulties through becoming explicitly conscious of them. (78) (emphasis added)

"Recognizing" and "addressing" our needs is more of a possibility today, than ever before, what with the electronic advances being realized all over the globe. People that have been isolated and segregated from interacting with one another for centuries are now engaged in building cyber-neighborhoods, with communication conduits linking us in ways that span even time and distance. There is every chance that a collective identity will emerge even stronger, with individual empowerment following that strength, forged partially through our connections in "virtual" reality. But unless we all have access to that *shared inheritance* of which Gadamer speaks, unless theorists step forward from their insulated distance to co-create strategies for the movement, the distance between disability ghettos and mainstream society will only increase until it becomes unbridgeable.

Currently, the "Movement" of the disability community is *neither* moving nor communal. It is in a state of stuck, and is dangerously fragmented, as many coalitions of the oppressed are wont to become. We are islands unto ourselves, forming a sort of Bermuda Triangle where "joint-thinking," or co-constructed theories, are impossible, due to the absence of transactions among the various disabled constituents. What is needed is a holistic joining that brings a "rationally defensible propositio[n] into contact with. . . human experience" (Hauser 28). Such a project would build a "hermeneutic circle" of knowledge that "necessarily involves interests, values, beliefs, and feelings, as well as more objective and dispassionate reasonings in a whole, complex pattern of response" (28) to societal disablement. We would enjoy more creative problem-solving, more effective stratagems, by *collaborating* in the exposure of *core issues* from which various veins of rights-violations tend to radiate. We would ourselves come to appreciate precisely that truth which we want the larger society to realize: that "the [O]ther may not only have a right, but may actually *be* right, may understand something better than we do" (Gadamer 82).

Perhaps, before we expect the larger society to respond to our appeals for inclusion, we must reject "the competitive notion at the heart of the idea that anybody's rights are more important or urgent than anyone else's" (Corker). We cannot hope to influence attitudes in a Brave New World that is firmly set on a trajectory of exclusion and elimination, without first defining disability as a rhetorical exigence - an urgent situation that has been created by language derived from class inequalities - and then crafting our rhetorical response with appeals that will "induce actions [that]

are capable of altering the environment" (Hauser 39).

This rhetorical exigence and the opportunity to defuse it through oppositional rhetorical appeals are part of the criteria that Lloyd Bitzer categorizes as the *Origin* stage of social movements. Yes, while the disability movement has been evolving for thirty years, it is still in an embryonic stage in that the exigence still exists. It is not that definitions or presentations of need have not been offered; perhaps we have just failed to use the most-effective words. Like any infant, we are new to the language; but if the movement hopes to reach maturity, we must not "fail to seize this moment," as Bitzer warns:

Other factors, perhaps other people addressing their own needs, may have complicated the situation. Attitudes may harden, making audiences less capable of being influenced . . . ; interest may weaken as the novelty wears thin. . . Without some extraordinary intervening circumstance or inspired rhetorical performance, the situation will pass into its final stage. (Hauser 39)

That final stage is "Disintegration." The exigence or situation has reached the stage where it is "no longer perceived as modifiable," and "the audience capable of being influenced and of mediating change no longer exists" (39). Before the Disability Movement falls into the category of "lost causes," we need to actively recruit and engage people from multidisciplinary "walks" (and ramps) of life, and each must be dedicated to team projects of bridging differences and confronting fears of difference.

Until the disability community takes up a common flag, and derives a consistent, cohesive, compelling position on social inclusion, I feel that our presence as a social movement will be undermined by our image as a fragmented cluster of separate *self-help groups*. As long as there is a tendency to privilege one field or one person's experience over another, we self-retard the progress of the whole Movement. Rather than becoming a global community with a common goal, we seem divided by our suspicions that greener grass lies on the other country's turf. All we are proving is that "separation is cold war," as Merleau-Ponty has argued, for it "yield[s] only abstract, formal spoils" (cover blurb, *Signs*).

To date, the most valuable "spoils" that the disabled population has garnered are the ADA in America, the DDA in Britain, and similar legislation in a handful of other nations. Even here, though, different perceptions and definitions abound, regarding both impairment and society's relationship with disabled citizens. Because "humans act on the basis of how they define situations," as Gerard Hauser argues, it is "these situational definitions that. . . evoke patterns of approach and avoidance, responses of territoriality and self-preservation, not to mention the more sophisticated responses of a symbolic order" (Hauser 32).

If we desire the powerful effects of collective identity, it is (re)definition that will bridge the distance between DisabilityLand and Hegemonia. We need those bridges in place, from the street to the Senate (or Parliament), and from grassroots to ivory towers. But the entire landscape of Disability Studies could also benefit from co-constructed bridges. When we preach "tolerance of diversity" to mainstream society, we ought to be able to show that we ourselves practice respect for each other's experiences. This applies equally well to academics, whose dialectical objective when they "speak among themselves. . . is criticism" (Hauser 24); and to the activist-orators, whose rhetoric sometimes falls on "deaf" ears because appeals that are meant to persuade have not been "situate[d] in terms of prevailing [academic] opinions" (24). When the various factions within the disability culture manage to confront each other, the worst of both worlds collide for they often cannot agree on "the problem," its exigency, the most-receptive audience, or the evidence to be presented - much less on the ultimate goal(s) desired.

To be sure, there is no one "right" way to appeal for civil rights, or to persuade dominant society to change its perception of physical or mental impairment. In our approaches to combating

ableism, we do not have to choose between polemics and narrative, accusations and apologies, or even between scholarly essays and expressive writing, for all these genres have their place in disability rhetoric - as long as they are supported by strategic choices which are a consensus of the people represented. A "layering" of genres, or a balanced mix of rhetorical appeals, are often more effective than a single campaign. For example, much of the protest literature I came across in the UK was based on a "You Can't" (exclude us, disrespect us, refuse to hire us or transport us or school us or liberate us) style of rhetoric. By contrast, much American writing leans toward the "I Am" (a mind, not just a body; a person, not a caricature in the movies; an equal, not a subaltern) stance on disability. Both of these positions, and more, are available to us, as this issue of *DSQ* demonstrates. There are many different styles of bridges, constructed of a great variety of materials. All we need is a *team* of architects working together with a *single* blueprint for a platform that will bridge a variety of currents that muddy the waters of the phenomenon known as Disability.

The neat thing about bridges (aside from the mileage that Bill Clinton has got from the metaphor) is that construction must begin on two sites at once. Dominant society needs to co-construct bridges with us, to meet us half-way, of course. But meanwhile, the more bridges we build within the disability culture, the stronger our footing will be every time we negotiate with those master bridgeworks agents. Also, we need to use "the master's language," as African Americans have argued, to evoke cooperation in our bridge-building enterprise.

If British disability is presented from a predominantly structuralist orientation that faults capitalism and the Industrial age for increasingly marginalizing the disabled subject while disability-American-Style focuses on the discrimination found in cultural productions such as literature and film, we may find that bridges to the Mainland will vary, according to which national ethos pervades the tollbooth. England's bridges and America's will also be *perceived* differently from across the "pond." It may look to us Americans as if Britons see one another as brothers and sisters, all cared for by a Queen Mother. "Mom and baseball," on the other hand, may seem to Britons the proof that America's "family values" rhetoric is a reality. In truth, both nations may be individualists, and collective thinking may not even be "in the ballpark" of capitalist ideologies.

The one point that the UK and the US scholars seem to agree on is that disability has a history; but neither nation has developed a compelling *rights*-rhetoric with linguistic gestures toward a history that reveals the how dynamic streams of *meaning* cause powerful currents in the lived experience of disabled people today. As Celeste Condit argues, the notion of "liberty," for instance, has had "particular meanings. . . in different times and places"; and any argument for "liberty" or "equality" or "civil rights" must consider the "complex interactions among the narrators, the audiences living in the present, and other nondiscursively articulated material conditions" that are consequences of the past" (Condit 176-7). If the Social Model (or any other heuristic for promotion of the right to inclusion) is to have cultural impact, advocates would be wise to recognize the force of language, and the many subtle ways in which a connotation normalized in "the past is [still] materially present in the languages and institutions in which we live, and which we seek to alter" (177).

Several of the essays and poems in this issue of *DSQ* have been selected because they are particularly cognizant of the ghosts of disability-past. Clearly, knowing from where we have come, how, and why, is critical as we plan for future bridges and deserved liberties. Other essays within these pages stress the need for *intertextual* connections in the study of disability in its past, present, and future incarnations. These writers ask us to "step outside your normal, everyday way of thinking," to ask important questions; then "shift frames again" and ask further questions that might reveal new perspectives (Mechling and Mechling 146). For some people ("e.g. schizophrenics, humorless people," suggests Jay Mechling), this ability to "play" with frames, "to move easily and comfortably between. . . levels of abstraction," is an unknown skill. But such intertextual play is crucial in "deconstructing the natural," and in revealing how a text may "migrate" from one context to another thus taking knowledge to a "metacommunicative level" (Gregory Bateson paraphrased in Mechling, 146)

This collection of writings demonstrates that adding historical perspectives and intertextual/interdisciplinary approaches to our repertoire may well be a method to bridging difference. A subtle, polysemic layering of appeals will only enhance any politicized rhetoric being articulated from the field of Disability Studies. But historicized intertextuality, along with the "social" model of understanding disabling attitudes and artifacts in our culture, may not be sufficiently persuasive unless we further strengthen the appeals with *personal narratives*. Bridges often require negotiations on an *individual* level. The scores of subject-positions and thousands of personal stories within the disability experience may well be what is needed to "take us from behind fixed concepts into the . . . lived experience that precedes science and conceptualism" (*The New Scholasticism*).

At the end of the day, the audience we need to appeal to is made up of individuals. And at this stage of civilization, the force that most powerfully affects us as individuals from Western society is, I could argue, the *cult of beauty* and the obsession for *perfection* (Burke). The idea that science and medicine can control nature, eliminate disease, and provide the fountain of youth is an attitudinal stance driven, I believe, by *fear* - fear of death, dependency, disability, devaluation as a nonproductive worker or undesirable partner or "redundant"/"expendable" human being.

This century's advances in science, medicine, industry, advertising, and the robotic-discourse of films such as *Edward Scissorhands*, *RoboCop*, and *Bladerunner* have all colluded to produce the worst social anxieties about the cyborg-future of humanity since Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*. We are all a bit phobic about our place in an ever-changing, ever-perfecting society. But just as Shelley's novel helped residents of the nineteenth century confront their fears, a strategically designed disability-rhetoric may likewise help people confront their fears about anomalous bodies today, as we cross the bridge to a new millennium.

To locate the most appropriate rhetorical appeals, for this time and place, for this Western cultural field, we will need the *combined* efforts of behavioral science, language-studies, cultural and media analyses, philosophy, political science, and the other Liberal Arts to align ourselves against the powerful discourses of the "hard" sciences, the media, and the charities - and against that most malignant force of all: internalized coercion. In other words, our own self-esteem needs uplifting as badly as the mentality of the mainstream needs a major overhaul.

Wider knowledge of the social forces and the language involved in disabling one-tenth of the world's population will relieve disabled persons of the sense of "personal anomie and isolation" (Katz 104). Wider knowledge of disability will, at the same time, reduce the fears harbored by nondisabled members of the human race if our rhetorical response is designed to increase universal self-acceptance of the unity of body and personhood. This achievement might, of itself, make "straddling two worlds" an anachronistic exercise. But in addition, as Alfred Katz suggests, our social movement might be remembered as being of service to

both its followers and the whole society. For it acts as a kind of social cement that binds people into a "we-group" from which they draw support and identity. For the wider society, it often educates the public about - and may therefore popularize - previously unacceptable ideas, policies, and practices. (104)

For global disability-rights culture to accrue these dual benefits, in addition to our success in "influenc[ing] policy and . . . bring[ing] about desired sociopolitical changes" (Katz 103), we need to share and acknowledge the commonalities among us; and then agree on definitions, ideologies, goals, and strategies for our bridge-building projects. This issue of DSQ - dedicated to exploring areas of commonality within the various halls of academe, as well as among disabled and nondisabled people, and among disabled people themselves - helps us to clarify the cultural and national and interpersonal junctions and intersections within the practice of disablement as it occurs around the globe. The essays, poems, and personal stories herein will not provide the answers.

They may not even provide blueprints for the bridges we need to build. But the mix of identities and ideas and images that this issue embraces does, I think, give us a better look at the many currents disabled people must navigate, in order to stay afloat. We cannot cover the dozens of issues involved in the "ecological system" that sustains the "disability business" (Albrecht); but the many common concerns explored here do seem to provide a "natural" tri-sectioned bridge that spans the Who, What, and Why involved in disability, its study, and its agents.

In Section I, "Bridging the Disciplines and the (Dis)abilities," Mairian Corker's essay gives us a "view from the bridge" that sees the potential in utilizing multidisciplinary approaches to the study of disability. David Pfeiffer then explores the ways in which both disabled and nondisabled people can contribute to disability studies - as long as the research and methods are of quality design and have import for the subject population. Finally, a poem by Kay Olsen explores the emotions that are evoked during the transition between sleep and waking, between life and death. "It is precisely here. . ." as Gadamer writes, "that we encounter the peculiar constitution of human beings. . ." (86).

Section II, "Bridges from Self to Community," dips into the "What" of disability, with its various streams and currents. The first issues under discussion are classified as "Family and Social" and Sonali Shah and Cheryl Travers report on Sonali's study with disabled people who attribute their career success to their childhood environments. Next, Maureen Connolly and Tom Craig describe their work in a movement-education camp for children with autism. Petra Kupperts analyzes the self- and cultural-inscriptions involved in "performing" and "reading" the much-photographed image of disabled fashion-model, Aimee Mullins. Finally, a poem by Johnson Cheu may resonate for many readers whose parents cannot come to terms with the disabilities of their children.

Another bridge between Self and community involves our interaction with "Experts." This part of Section II begins with Roz Darling's analysis of the collaboration between parents and professionals. Then, Penny Kearney gives us a glimpse of her journey into DisabilityLand, via both the nursing profession and her personal experience as a "carer." Another poem by Johnson Cheu exposes the trajectory of secret guilt often played out in unconventional motherhood when decades-old stories are finally revealed.

"School" is a third bridge we all traverse in our linkages with the mainstream world, and the professorial team of Alec Webster, Carmel Hand, John Franey, and Peter Hingley, of the University of Bristol (my UK alma mater), explores topical issues for inclusive education. Next, Dennis Rose compares the attitudes towards teaching disabled children among faculty in Singapore with their American counterparts.

The final part of Section II, "Economy and Autonomy," begins with a look at Britain, under the Blair government, as perceived by Jennifer Harris, Bob Sapey, and John Stewart. The same economic and independence considerations are then explored by Marta Russell who spotlights current policies in America. Then, we look at the issue of personal independence and control of one's life when a former student of mine, Rachel Ogami, asserts that her right to participate in society is being denied as long as personal assistants are underpaid and, therefore, unavailable.

Section III contains essays that offer closure for this issue, but the Australian writers also make appeals to move forward at the same time. Helen Meekosha and Andrew Jakubowicz contribute an overview of social movements in general and then discuss the specific case of disability-rights as they are forwarded in Australia, America, and Great Britain. Erik Leipoldt's essay, "Us and Them?," brings us full circle to the questions I pose above: can we build bridges within the disability community to strengthen our presence in hegemonic culture?

I am pleased that this collection of empirical essays and creative writing touches on so many diverse - but connective - issues of importance to people with disabilities. Had we but more time and paper, no doubt, we might have added even more "planks" and platforms to the bridges we seek to design through the ideas presented here. I hope this issue contributes to the construction

of many bridges as we span disability issues from this millennium to the next. In the words Connolly and Craig (Section II, this issue), "scholarship must take the risks of slackening the habitual strings which bind us to agendas." I believe that if we are to "open up worlds and realities which challenge and enrich conventionality. . .we [must be] willing to work on coexisting with others in the style of attentive wonder and deep regard."

A Word about Style: In keeping with the multicultural contributions to this issue, I have not (completely) inflicted an "Americanized" style upon these works (although the MLA-style of punctuation is partially followed, due to an academic-epidermis that I ca not quite shed). You will find, therefore, a great tolerance for spelling variations, as well as for the occasional English euphemism, the Australian accent, the Singaporean slant, the Canadian cliché, and the All-American-isms. Please also allow for the unconventional (but consistent) method of source-documentation. The intention, obviously, is to be culturally inclusive.

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