

## Current Research

### Introduction

#### Exploring Foundations: Languages of Disability, Identity, and Culture

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What is the difference between a scholar who writes on *The Gospel According to Mark* and a disability studies scholar who writes on the same topic? What happens when the latter crosses paths with a “deaf and dumb paralytic” and “demoniacs”? What about the “unclean spirits” who lurk in the shadows? Our generic scholar, we would imagine, unflinchingly records their presence and focuses upon the nondisabled main actor(s). The disability studies scholar pauses, shudders, seeks out the human subjects erased beneath these labels, and then invariably recognizes her own potential inclusion amongst them. (As Lois Bragg does in her essay in this volume.) Why does this difference in approach matter? And how does this scholarly activity differ from our own daily refusals and recastings, if we are disabled ourselves, of the labels that are tossed in our direction. Our disability studies scholar may take refuge in the opportunity for historical distance which allows her to scrutinize texts and events of past periods with a cold, analytical eye. This distance often proves unavailable to her on a day-to-day basis. She also ventures an approach to the meanings of these semi-fictional, quasi-historical figures. Such figures are some of the few textual remnants that allow her to reconstruct the attitudes and beliefs of a prior culture toward disability. In turn, our disability studies scholar notices more and more the prevalence of these side actors - these cripples, misfits, and fools - in the pages of Time’s texts.

Of course the plotline of this gospel story has been reread and rewritten for centuries by readers and writers before her. Who among them has stopped to notice these “demoniacs”? For what purpose? Have writers from other epochs forged an approach or a distance to disabled figures? For instance, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche restages a similar biblical encounter between a philosophical Christ-figure and his crippled hordes seeking a cure in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. In this restaging does he then also critique or merely reiterate the metaphysical plight of the original? What does this say about the coherence or variability of attitudes toward the disabled in other historical moments?

Our disability studies scholar further notes that cripples and grotesques come walking through Zarathustra’s forest at regular intervals and yet no other historian or philosopher has ever connected up people with disabilities to Nietzsche’s project (though plenty have noted the Nazi use of Nietzsche’s writings as justification

for their extermination programs). She begins to analyze their disruptive presence, their general exclusion from other philosophical treatises, and Nietzsche's use of them as discomfiting presences within his own philosophical system. This interpretive activity requires an analysis of disability language, roles, and conventions in his philosophical allegories. Much of her approach depends upon the markings and erasures effected by labels, terms, and linguistic propositions that lead to a sense of the varying constructions of disability over time. "History" becomes an archive of texts that articulates numerous social systems which produced attitudes and meanings for various kinds of different and impaired bodies.

In the application of an approach such as the one outlined above, the disability studies scholar in the humanities begins to allow us a glimpse of historical negotiations and attitudes toward disability. A disability studies humanities approach helps to identify a previously absent or unarticulated *tradition* of disability. To resurrect and reconstruct this tradition, disability studies scholars read between the lines and behind the potent sign systems used to designate deviance and difference. Like the "resistant readers" of feminism or racial criticism, we seek out disability from a perspective (constituted in the act of resistance itself) - a disabled perspective. This perspective neither simply accepts these presentations as truthful nor overlooks their significance for understanding disabled perspectives in history. In this, humanities disability scholars are acquiring a sense of the constitutive role played by disabled peoples in the emergence of social and semantic systems.

Or inversely, we see the dependencies of representational systems upon them. What does it mean that sixty of the earliest preserved cuneiform tablets from 2000 B.C. in ancient Mesopotamia identify more than 125 symbolic connotations for birth "anomalies"? Such an artifact points to the key precept that disabled people play a foundational role in the definition and evolution of cultures. Does ability exist without disability? Normalcy without physical deviance? Is there a heroic story of compensation without the reiteration of disabled limitations? Can human societies recognize immorality or evil without reference to biological "aberrancy"?

Disability studies in the humanities has been critiqued for a tendency to surf amidst a sea of metaphors rather than stand on the firm ground of policy and legislative action. However, the identification of variable representational systems for approaching disability in history demonstrates in and of itself that disability operates as a socially constructed category. The more varied and variable the representation, the more fervent and exemplary disability studies scholars can make our points about the complexity and persistence of this social construction.

From this same awareness, the scholars included in this volume interpret the "signs" that lead to social categories of stigma, segregation, and genocide. For instance, Will Sayers identifies how the use of physical descriptors such as

“crooked”, “biased”, or “wry necked” could exclude certain individuals from ascending to the kingship in early Irish narrative. In mapping a linguistic history of medicalized insanity and cognitive disability, Licia Carlson and Patrick McDonough invoke terms such as “moral imbecile”, “mental illness”, “idiots”, and “madmen”, to arrive at an understanding of the varied attempts to define the slippery definition of a “non-normative intellect”. Cindy LaCom argues that physical differences came to be seen as increasingly “deviant” or “alien” during the ascendancy of a medical model in the nineteenth century that sought to regulate and normalize bodily variation. In order to interrogate ideals of oratory perfection, Brenda Brueggemann and James Fredal demonstrate the dependencies of a tradition of Rhetoric upon constructing an “other” of “impaired” performance. The point of attending to these conventions of genres, disabled character types, story modes, metaphors, and formulas, is to offer a previously unarticulated breadth to our comprehension of the history of disability.

Sometimes, a focus upon the cross-referencing of texts has resulted in a suspicion that humanities scholarship neglects the “real” subject of disability. Even as the study of linguistic figures, tropes, and terms serves as a passageway back into the mindset and beliefs of other eras and cultures, it also gestures forward to the origins of current cultural attitudes and terminologies. Hence our efforts to identify the many permutations in the definition and role of disability in history should also enable us to chase down the multiple inflections in our own moment - both the ascription of derogatory terms to us and our resistance, accommodation, and self-inflection of them. In a basic sense (and as the disability movement’s recent “fix-it” solutions to “diagnostic” labels shows us) the insult that different terms conjure up continues to foster the steady industry of our personal rejection and social revision. For example, we now prefer “delayed” over “retarded” - which was itself once intended to erase the inept “idiot” or the racist “mongolism”. One can already imagine that eventually “delayed” will prove insufficient as the term is reappropriated and applied to ourselves in medicine, rehabilitation, and education. In this seeking out of the directions of our own (linguistic) “progress”, in refusing “cripple” as corrupt or embracing “cripple” as pointedly sensationalist and archaic, we make apparent our own awareness of the insufficiencies of language to adequately describe our experience.

Humanities scholars tend to foreground a discussion of terminology as an open gesture toward understanding the value-laden meaning of vocabulary rather than simply electing to adopt the current “progressive” vernacular of the day. The majority of essays in this issue openly wrestle with their reasons for choosing one kind of term/category over another. Since language and story-telling are the principle means by which we filter and interpret our experience, one must think about and through the words and plotlines that different historical eras and cultures used to

define people with disabilities and those believed to represent various “aberrancies” or “conditions.” This history of labels and epithets steeps the disability studies researcher in a quagmire of dehumanizing references, and one often finds it tempting to lump everything together as evidence of the stigmatizing attitudes that have perpetually followed the disabled. Yet, as the essays in this issue demonstrate, there are substantial differences between vocabularies and meanings that must be teased out.

A squaring off of different representational devices in varying historical periods can yield important distinctions in the cultural treatment of disability. For instance, the medieval designation of cripples as “demoniacs” demonstrates that physical and cognitive differences were treated as signs of divine punishment and metaphysical disruption. Those designated as “demoniacs” represented a powerful symbolic grouping signifying an intimacy with a secret knowledge of the celestial or as harbingers of foreboding cultural doom. These more symbolic and mythic meanings eventually gave way to other modes of representation such as an increasingly medicalized notion of pathology and deviance derived from statistically determined ideals of physical/cognitive norms. The evolution of later terminology such as the nineteenth-century term “invalid” suggests an emphasis upon bodily dysfunction and organic breakdown. Yet, while one ideologically coded system of terms gives way to other often equally denigrating ones, they continue to inform and inflect the other. The demoniacs of one era metamorphose into the monstrosity of another era which, in turn, evolves into the teratology of another; yet the voyeuristic fascination and cultural fetishization of a previous time continues to be practiced under a new set of rules, terms, and beliefs. Attending to such differences in the social construction of disability precludes many of the essayists in this volume from pursuing linguistic prescriptions as an antidote to the multiple historical valences of language.

All of these examples demonstrate that the historical language used to define, segregate, and confine people with disabilities is a rich, but fraught area for research and interpretation. An encounter with this vast array of historical synonyms for physical and cognitive deviancy evidences that while we seek a less dehumanizing, politicized vocabulary to reference disability, such a project proves difficult. Even the widely accepted term of “disability” denotes a form of euphemistic window dressing that can not successfully exorcise the “barbarism” of previous terminology and attitudes from which we seek social redress and compensation. The battle over self-naming hits at the heart of linguistic struggles themselves. Yet, as Mark Jeffries argues in his discussion of the relationship of linguistic signs to the goals of political reform: “rather than claiming or disclaiming any set of stigmata (or stigmatizing terminology), a successful poetics of disability would operate from a relentless skepticism of the motives and the truth-value of any sign (marks, names, jargon) . .

. [S]igns have no more an essential, autonomous existence than the categories they represent, and no sign can indelibly mark or irretrievably erase a meaning.” This “relentless skepticism” provides disability studies with a more dynamic understanding of the politicized notion of language, and helps to develop a less naive historical recognition that all terms become contaminated with the very ideas they seek to obliterate or refuse.

The need to develop a more protean sense of language surfaces as disability studies methodologies become increasingly prominent in academic discourse. We see numerous examples of critics and educators who refuse to include disability under current work in identity and cultural studies. These arguments seize upon the “biological evidence” or bodily remainder of disability in order to shore up disabled people’s difference from that of other socially disenfranchised constituencies. In this refusal, medicine is still assumed to offer up a pure diagnostic arena as opposed to a social one. Take this excerpt from the editor of the academic journal, *Philosophy & Literature*, in the middle of a diatribe against the politically correct policing of university press bias handbooks:

The idea of *normality* (e.g., of white blood cell count, body proportion, breathing rate, bone fragility, rectal temperature, etc.) is fundamental to the theory and practice of medicine; it is not a set of prejudices but is achieved by the study of pathologies of disease and health. The same can be said of contrasting terms such as *abnormal*, *subnormal*, or *above normal*. . . you cannot parlay the commonness of some medical pathology into its normality, *particularly if it is a condition people would normally be desperate to avoid or cure*. “Black is beautiful” meant “black is normal,” “we like being black,” and even in an extended sense,” “we *choose* to be black.” This liberationist rhetoric is not transferable to the realm of blindness, wheelchairs, polio, and cretinism. People bravely make the best of these conditions, but they cannot claim to choose them. (Dutton 560, his emphasis)

This argument exposes more than evidence of the persistence of political bigotry in the ivory tower of academic enlightenment. According to this ideology, while marginal identities such as race, gender, and sexuality can be resignified into powerful points of cultural identification, no amount of linguistic triage can put the disabled body back together again. The recourse to medical terminology as “facts” - blood cell counts, body proportions, breathing rates, bone fragility, etc. - dredges up what the editor sees as the repressed downside or dark underbelly of disability. While anyone who has “done time” on the examination tables of medical institutions and as an object of medical “diagnosis” knows, “a set of prejudices” often proves

to be exactly what is on display. One could literally invert the above comment by saying that, *the commonness of medical ideologies of normality are always parlayed into numerous justifications for the diagnosis of pathologies.*

Contrary to the editor's belief, "*abnormal, subnormal, and above normal*" result from qualitative and subjective judgments (as opposed to objective statistics) that seek to use professional authority to, in Lennard Davis' words, "enforce normalcy."

There is a good deal of historical contingency to arguments about the celebratory and *chosen* identity of Blackness, femininity, or any other cultural identification with a marginalized group. The capacity to embrace an historically denigrated position takes a history of effort to effect, and one never absolutely arrives at the desired objective. Derogatory epithets such as "nigger", "feminized", or "queer" still surface and, because of language's slippery qualities, metamorphose into differently dehumanizing reference systems that invoke associations of particular biologies with welfare, criminality, unproductivity, and inferior intelligence. While it is difficult for the above cited commentator to imagine anyone *choosing* disability, our efforts to make disability a social category of identification rather than a "flawed condition" provides the opportunity of a *choice*. While one cannot always choose to extricate oneself from a medicalized notion of abnormalcy projected from the outside, the "disability" rubric provides an opportunity to upend social expectations. The *choice* of such a self-designation flirts with the scandalous political potential of embracing the very identity that critics believe to be repugnant and untenable.

Further evidence of this stance is offered by the editor of the above quoted passage who goes on to reprove the gerrymandering tendencies of linguistic reform movements by explaining that, "sooner or later the schoolyard finds out, and *retard* becomes the coinage of abuse. Everyone ought to deplore the abuse, but it is a delusion to suppose that we alter medical facts by dispensing new names, for *it is the medical condition that is the problem, not the words that describe it*" (Dutton 559, his italics). Rather than deny that one embodies a socially despised biology, the objective of disability studies and the disability rights movement is to demonstrate that power derides some biologies in order to produce an environment of privilege for other bodily types. Since there is no *choice* to the inherent mutability of biology in the cases of race, gender, or disability (and sometimes it is argued sexuality), we set our disciplinary sites on the contexts within which that biology is derided and objectified. The "law of the playground" may persist but do our philosophers/publishers/teachers have to participate in its denigrating and infantile logics?

Yet, in many ways we have not sufficiently attended to the wild card of biology that operates as the point of our ostracization in the current political debate. As Paul Longmore once stated to me during a phone conversation about the weaknesses of our current politics, people with disabilities cannot afford to overlook

or deny the vulnerability and “real” limitations of their bodies. Is it necessary to refuse an acknowledgment of biological fragility or incapacity in order to establish an effective political movement? Can one not recognize the often very real limitations of the bodies that we inherit or acquire without having to give up on revising the politicized reception of the disabled body? The question that disability studies scholars must take up now is whether or not it is possible to acknowledge a physically/cognitively limited body that is not automatically viewed as hopeless, unproductive, or benightedly tragic in the social sphere. This will become one of the significant ways in which disability studies will not only shift our ideas of physical and cognitive difference, but also radically revise the neglect of the body in other disciplines and areas of inquiry.

An adequate address of this question is complicated and will take years of effort, but the essays in this volume begin to make some important inroads toward formulating some possible approaches. For instance, Georgina Kleege explains that her blindness has spurred her own necessity to develop an unusual apparatus of tape recorded papers in her composition and creative writing classes. Such an adaptation has resulted in perhaps an even more effective pedagogical strategy for providing students with the opportunity to “hear” their writing before handing it in. Rosemarie Thomson addresses the innovations of theories in body criticism in order to point out that even the most denigrated bodily forms provide interpretive alternatives to “deviance, lack, and inferiority.” Susan Crutchfield points out that Hollywood’s tendency to individualize the experience of disability can provide a useful template for analyzing the general public’s reception of disability in the everyday world. In his essay on disability autobiography, G. Thomas Couser argues that writing one’s own experience allows the control of self-definition and authority over the terms of the disabled body’s presentation and reception. Ironically, it may be work on the admittedly more “textual” objects addressed in humanities scholarship that allows us to begin reintroducing a more material notion of the body back into disability studies methodologies, praxis, and politics. We are honored to present the essays which follow as examples of some of the best new thinking in disability studies.

### **Works Cited**

Dutton, Denis. “What Are Editors For?” *Philosophy And Literature* 20 [2] (October 1996), 551-566.