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Dialogues

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Conference Report

Theorising Culture and Disability: Interdisciplinary Dialogues

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Held at Manchester Metropolitan University on 3 July, 2008, Theorising Culture and Disability: Interdisciplinary Dialogues was an opportunity to take stock of interdisciplinary approaches to culture and disability in Britain. Attracting scholars from Prague and Belgium, as well as a strong contingent from the UK, a packed day included eight papers and the launch of Stuart Murray's *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*, the first title in the Representations: Health, Disability, Culture series from Liverpool University Press. Offering a snapshot of where we are now, the event also provided a point from which to look forwards, demonstrating the significant possibilities, as well as the potential problems, of the interdisciplinary study of disability and culture.

Dan Goodley described his opening address as the “what, why and how of critical disability studies.” Trans-disciplinary, trans-national, and connecting disability with other forms of politicization, critical disability studies incorporates both materialist and non-materialist approaches. Rather than focusing on sociology or social policy, as much UK disability studies writing has done, a critical disability studies involves reconnecting with social science and humanities disciplines. It offers a means of moving beyond tired debates for and against the social model, while still recognizing the debt owed to the activism of disabled people.

This raises the question of the relationship between “critical” and “cultural” disability studies, an issue that was never explicitly addressed during this event. Cultural disability studies is distinctive because it seeks to contribute both to our understanding of disability and its role in wider culture, *and* to our understanding of the particular cultural form or artefact under consideration (see the Aims of this journal, for example). The majority of the papers presented in Manchester took this approach, considering the representation of disability in various media with this dual aim. The exceptions were the papers by Brett Smith and Alison Wilde (discussed further below), which analysed

and theorized interviews. While offering excellent illustrations of what a more inclusive disability studies might look like, they seemed to me to have a single rather than a dual focus. How significant this difference is, and how we might think about it—whether it is better understood as a variation in the type of data used, as a difference between social science-based and humanities-influenced approaches, or between a “critical” and “cultural” disability studies—is a topic that requires further exploration.

The significant contribution cultural disability studies can make was illustrated in a number of strong papers. Rebecca Mallett’s “Claims for Comedic Immunity: Or, What Do You Get When You Cross Contemporary Comedy with Disability?” examined representations of disability in recent British comedy, including programmes such as *Little Britain* and *The Office*. Noting challenges to the idea of “comedic immunity” from those working on race, gender, and sexuality, she called for a greater engagement with comedy and asserted the necessity of using tools from other disciplines to approach it. From literary studies, Clare Barker’s “Disability and Postcolonial Studies: Initiating Interdisciplinary Dialogues” illustrated a particularly fruitful field of enquiry: the integration of disability studies with postcolonial approaches. While both disability-influenced and postcolonial approaches share a common sensitivity to issues of representation, Dr. Barker noted the limitations of western-based methodologies for examining disability in other countries. Engaging productively with David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s work on disability and metaphor, she concluded with a reading of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, arguing that while current criticism tends to focus on shortcomings in representation, it is our reading strategies that need to change. In another paper focusing on literature, “Teaching a Dead Dog New Tricks: Appraising Interdisciplinarity Through Critical Engagements with Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*,” Irene Rose examined responses to the book from different fields, as well as exploring the idea of links between autism/Asperger’s Syndrome and criminality. Noting that the contemporary cultural landscape of autism is changing, her paper also engaged closely with Stuart Murray’s *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*, and as the last paper of the day, provided an excellent introduction to the book launch that followed.

While these papers indicated the strength of the contribution cultural disability studies can make, two other papers reflected more explicitly on what cultural approaches can offer. Lucy Burke and David Bolt’s “Symbiosis and Subjectivity: Literary Representations of Disability and Social Care” considered the topic of care, but also explored the larger issue of what the study of literature has

to offer disability studies. Noting that literary disability studies is sometimes seen as a “frill” on disability studies, the authors argued for a more powerful and formative role for literary and narrative analysis. Making links with moral philosophy, they argued that an engagement with novelistic discourse can alert us to the multiple and complex ways in which care can signify. Stuart Murray, in “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Interdisciplinary Disability Studies in the UK,” also focused on literature, mapping out the issues currently faced by literary scholars working on disability. Noting that there is a sense “of a subject becoming a subject” within literary disability studies in the UK, he discussed the implications for the subject of the dual heritage of the social model and of the approaches developed by US scholars such as Mitchell and Snyder and Leonard J. Davis. Reflecting upon his own approach in *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*, he concluded by suggesting that a radical humanism might offer a way forward for cultural disability studies.

Kateřina Kolářová’s paper also invited reflections about the nature of cultural disability studies, though in a slightly different way. In “Performing the Pain, Opening the Body for Pleasure,” she examined the work of the American performance artist Bob Flanagan, arguing that through sadomasochistic practices, Flanagan (who had cystic fibrosis) was able to recontextualize his pain, transforming the disabled body into a scene of desire. This paper raised questions of the borders of cultural disability studies: focused on an individual artist and indeed on an individual show (1992’s “Visiting Hours”), it was difficult to articulate what—if anything—made this cultural *disability* studies rather than cultural studies. It was only in the questions following the paper that the possible broader significance of Flanagan’s work for disability studies was explored. This is not intended as a criticism of what was a very interesting paper; rather, we might want to think about where interdisciplinary work on disability and culture stands in relation to work from outside disability studies on topics such as pain, trauma, and “the body,” and if it is productive to distinguish between the two.

Dr. Kolářová’s paper also raised questions about the role of theory. For example, did her use of Elaine Scarry’s work on pain—often cited by disability studies scholars—automatically mark her paper as being to do with disability studies? What is the disciplinarity of theory? In “Spectacle, performance and the re-presentation of disability and impairment,” Alison Wilde described her research on how media resources contribute to patterns of inclusion and exclusion. She noted that she had used work from media and television studies, disability studies, audience studies, gender studies, and identity studies in her interdisciplinary approach to audience engagement with representations of

disability. For me, this raised further questions about theory and interdisciplinarity: are these all “disciplines”? Is it the theory or how it is used that matters? A close engagement with theory was also seen in Brett Smith’s paper, “Storied Boundaries within Disability Research: Some Theoretical Reflections on ‘How Close Is Too Close’ to Research Participants, and ‘How Far Is Too Far.’” Noting that disability research and practice is a “play of boundaries,” Dr. Smith used the work of Bakhtin, Levinas, and Bourdieu (among others) to analyse his conversations with research participants in spinal hospitals. This was clearly a fruitful exercise, with concepts such as Bakhtin’s distinction between monologue and dialogue offering new and productive ways of thinking about how the research was conducted. It was clear, though, that the theory was, in a sense, applied retroactively, used to offer new perspectives on work already done. Davis has noted that much of the work labelled as “interdisciplinary” in academe is really what he terms “multidisciplinary”: “not really a synthesis of disciplines, which is what true interdisciplinarity would involve—but just a kind of sequential movement back and forth from one discipline to another, like serving eggs followed by mushrooms rather than a mushroom omelet.” In this case, “eggs followed by mushrooms” was both interesting and productive—but the possibility of a future mushroom omelette even more so.

As Stuart Murray noted, “interdisciplinary” means different things to people working in different areas. The questions I was left with at the close of this event all, ultimately, came back to interdisciplinarity, and what it means in, and for, research on disability and culture. Concepts like Davis’s “multidisciplinary” clearly offer one way forwards, acknowledging the existence of multiple interdisciplinarity, and offering a more precise way of talking and thinking about *how* a work is interdisciplinary. The event’s subtitle, “interdisciplinary dialogues,” can be understood in two ways: as meaning dialogues *between* disciplines, or dialogues that *are interdisciplinary*. *Theorising Culture and Disability: Interdisciplinary Dialogues* illustrated the vibrancy of interdisciplinary approaches to disability and culture in the UK today; but it also demonstrated the need for us to think more about our own interdisciplinarity.

Works Cited

- Davis, Lennard J. “A Grand Unified Theory of Interdisciplinarity.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8 June, 2007: B9.
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