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Key Concerns for Critical Disability Studies

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# Key Concerns for Critical Disability Studies

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## ABSTRACT

The *International Journal of Disability and Social Justice* is a timely intervention into the interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies. Any new initiative, especially in a pre-existing and maturing field of inquiry, should encourage us all to think critically and reflexively about the key questions and issues that we should be grappling with today. This paper offers an inevitably partial take on some of the key concerns that we think scholars, activists and artists of Disability Studies should be engaging with. Everything we do these days takes place in the shadows cast by the global pandemic. While it is important to acknowledge the centrality of COVID-19 – and the threat this poses to the mind-bodies, politics and everyday realities of disabled people – we want to foreground some preoccupations, ideas and debates emerging from within the field of Disability Studies that will have resonance beyond the pandemic. We will begin the paper by offering a perspective on the contemporary nature and state of Disability Studies; suggesting that many of us are Critical Disability Studies thinkers now. Next, in order to narrow the focus of the discussion in this brief paper, we choose one emergent and popular theoretical orientation – posthuman Disability Studies. Then, we introduce and elaborate on four broad concerns that we think we should engage with; desire, alliances, non/humans and their implications for conceptualising social justice. Throughout the paper we will work through some of the power dynamics, questions of accountability and requirements for a generosity of engagement that these concerns provoke.

## KEYWORDS

**Critical Disability Studies; Social justice; Desire; Alliances; Non-humans; Posthuman**

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## I. Introduction: Contemplating Disability Studies in the Here and Now

Like many people fortunate to have jobs in academia we spend our days working from home. As we glance out of the windows of our make-shift studies, set up in kitchens and bedrooms, we are struck with a sense of solitude. Online meetings, digital teaching and remote supervisions can only provide limited forms of human contact. It feels, at times, that their virtual nature is no substitution for face-to-face interaction. Conferences are cancelled. Qualitative fieldwork that cannot be transferred to online platforms is paused. Networking opportunities are curtailed. Preparation meetings for research bids no longer provide opportunities for meet-ups in different towns and cities across the country. And this lack of human interaction brings with it feelings of disconnection. Simultaneously, each of us has felt the seductive potential of the move to online: the immediacy it gives us, the accessible virtual lines of flight that feel a million miles away from the broken lifts, poor parking space and unwelcoming physical university environments of pre-pandemic inaccessible university estates. Overall, though, when we think about the folk in our international community of Disability Studies, our relation to one another feels strained, narrowed and restricted. Of course, some of us have to particularly recognise our privilege. In pre-pandemic times some of us were able to access these physical spaces while others struggled with everyday barriers. And now we recognise that precarity in relation to the pandemic is differential. Disabled friends, activists, artists and researchers have felt the full impact of lockdown, shielding and isolation. One of us is living a shielded life as a new parent. At worst, people have experienced the death of close ones and a daily terrifying threat to life itself. Yet we still have a commitment to being part of a wider network of Disability Studies folk. These opportunities for community are, one could argue, more important than ever. We get a feel for these communities through our membership of groups, organisations and networks. We find like-minded thinkers in journals, books, vlogs, social media and online discussions. Yet every day, we return to various kinds of disembodied, disconnected and dislocated spaces of home/work. This is what Hardt and Negri (2000) meant in their book *Empire*: the 24/7 never-ending blurring of immaterial and material labour. Bedrooms as offices. Work days merging with weekends. Days into nights. And, for some, home has offered a safe haven but also felt like imprisonment. So, our community feels to be often out of reach. It therefore feels timely and appropriate to explore what we mean by Disability Studies and the relationship this field of inquiry has to the contemporary moment. This will involve questioning who we connect with in this interdisciplinary community from the confines of our home/work lives.

Our methodology for scoping out the nature of the field is an unscientific, subjective and scattergun approach that draws insights from contemporary scholarship, online seminars and conferences and social media postings. Whilst engaging in this exercise we have been reminded that researchers are never more in touch with their fields of inquiry than when they are in the full throes of doctoral research (e.g. Daniels, 2020; Ktenidis, 2020). Early career researchers are often those most in tune with the state of critical Disability Studies scholarship. In contrast, this is a thematic literature review written by old hands (some older than others) who are scouring a field of inquiry. Fortunately, we have opportunities to work alongside one another as part of an established community of disability researchers at the University of Sheffield and colleagues in various locations around the globe. We feel at least provisionally qualified to offer a perspective on the state of play of Disability Studies. In writing a recent text (Goodley, 2020) – started before and completed during the pandemic – one of us found the time to develop a literature review of the Disability Studies field that sought to capture some of the emerging and contemporary theoretical orientations, analytical preoccupations and intellectual debates. This acted as a background exercise to the main writing of the book, which was focused on addressing a non-specialist readership assumed to have little to no knowledge of Disability Studies. We use this paper to present some of our collective partial readings of the intellectual landscape. In eking out a perspective on contemporary writing, this has helped us to connect – perhaps reconnect – with a community that remains incredibly important to us: intellectually and emotionally. Perhaps this search for scholarship and connection offers us one way of re-engaging with a community that we have felt distanced from. It is, of course, a privileged mode of reconnection.

The first thing we would assert is that we find ourselves in a time of *critical* Disability Studies. That is to say, intellectual progress and theoretical sophistication are now key features of disability scholarship. In her 2007 book, the highly influential disabled feminist Carol Thomas suggested that British Disability Studies had moved from the first wave of disability theory (associated with materialism and neo-Marxism) into a second wave of thinking (influenced by feminist and poststructuralist ideas). In the 13 years since Thomas published her wonderful book, theorisation in Disability Studies has mushroomed. Early career and doctoral researchers, in particular, have imported a whole host of approaches from the phenomenological, critical psychological, psychoanalytic, critical pedagogical, queer, postcolonial, posthuman, critical realist, new materialist to post-anthropocentric. Disability has been cast as a cultural, fictional, psychological, relational, psychic, political, economic, social, historical . . . [take a deep breath] . . . technological, biopsychological, biosocial, thanatopolitical, affirmative, performative and foundational phenomenon. The sheer intensity and amount of intellectual work has created a cacophony of epistemological voices, a myriad of ontological perspectives and a plethora of methodological approaches. Disability has arrived in the intellectual world: as an object of study

(screaming out for considered and ethical engagements) and a driving subject of analysis (as a core part of the human condition). Our own view, then, is that this sophistication has moved the field of inquiry into a state of *critical Disability Studies* (Shildrick, 2009, 2012), where we might start with disability but never end with it (Goodley, 2014). Disability Studies researchers are more critical of themselves and, we would argue, more willing to critique their assumptions, methodologies and analytical framings than ever before. This is not to say that past scholars were not self-critical. Rather, we would suggest that a maturing intellectual field becomes more adept and open at reflecting on its own deficiencies. Shildrick's (2005, 2012) messaging that we have moved towards a postconventional Disability Studies is useful here. While Shildrick has in mind a distinct theoretical destination (associated with Deleuzian, vitalist and queer connections), the emphasis she gives to a more general sense of questioning conventional wisdom is, we would argue, a leitmotif of critical Disability Studies.

Now, it is important to acknowledge that critical Disability Studies does not abandon foundational work – such as that associated with the social, cultural, relational and minority models of disability – but builds on this work in ways that capture the contemporary complexities associated with disability. A brief scanning of the theoretical landscape reveals a multitude of perspectives populating an ever-growing intellectual terrain. In order to narrow the focus down of this short paper we want to work with an increasingly popular perspective within critical Disability Studies: *post-human Disability Studies* (e.g. Gibson, 2006; Cheyne, 2013; Goodley et al, 2014; Griet, 2009; Feely, 2015, 2016, 2020; Van Trigt et al, 2016; Dewsbury, 2011; Gibson et al, 2012; Whitney et al, 2019; Murray, 2017, 2020; Saur and Sidorkin, 2018; Clinckenbeard, 2020; Goodley and Martin, 2020). We are not suggesting that this is the *only* way we should epistemologically ground ourselves. Nor are we intimating that this is *the (new)* grand theoretical narrative from which we should conceptualise the world. Instead, we are asserting that posthuman Disability Studies is a burgeoning area of scholarship in critical disability research because it is in tune with the complexities of the contemporary moment, which has been variously described as Industry 4.0 (Schwab, 2016), our current period of cognitive capitalism (Rindermann and Thompson, 2011) and a state of play that is increasingly understood as the postanthropocene (Braidotti, 2013, 2019; Braidotti and Hlavajova, 2018). Across the art and humanities and medical, human and social sciences, researchers are grappling with the complex fusing of human and non-human entities that mark the 21st-century citizen. A crucial consideration for critical Disability Studies analyses relates to investigating the ways in which different kinds of inequalities and differences are reconfirmed, recalibrated and recreated in this heady mix of technological, globalised, environmental human and non-human entanglements. If COVID-19 captures, in a dystopian manner, the intermeshed more-than-human lives that we inhabit (Braidotti, 2020), we should explore the extent to which some humans (and non-humans for that matter) are more impacted upon than others. Human beings have never been more powerful (a state of affairs captured by the

concept of the anthropocene), more technologically advanced (in the midst of the 4th Industrial revolution) or more at risk (referenced as the 6th Extinction and evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic). This strange paradox of humankind – where our species is enhanced by science and augmented by technology but also threatened by the impacts of our destructive actions on the planet – constitutes an urgent problem for researchers. As human predicaments are those of the planet and its inhabitants, so the very existence of humankind depends upon our successful and sustainable coexistence with animals, machines, the environment and other humans. Now is the time to rethink human and non-human interrelations in ways that mutually sustain us. The challenges human beings face can no longer be addressed in isolation from their relations with animals, machines and the environment. These entanglements are ever-changing, complex and dynamic. The prevailing scholarly consensus and populist framing of these dynamics is wholly negative: climate change, species extinction, genetic modification, synthetic farming, the widespread adoption of drones, the AI and robotic take-over, the dangers of ubiquitous digitalisation and Big Data. We flirt with dystopia; pitching humans, animals, machines and environments against one another. Such a view fuels apocalyptic moral panics, breeds paranoia and entrenches artificial distinctions between humans and non-humans. In contrast, recent scholarship from within the social sciences, arts and humanities makes a strong case for thinking more positively, affirmatively and creatively about human beings' shared obligations to environments, animals and machines (as well as with other humans). A fruitful area of scholarship would involve engaging with the generative hopes and opportunities that might be found in these established and new interrelations.

One theoretical approach associated with the posthuman turn in critical Disability Studies is that of new materialism (Feely, 2015, 2016; Flynn, 2017; Gibson, 2006; Dewsbury, 2011; Gibson et al, 2012; Saldanha, 2012; Monforte, 2018; Monforte and Smith, 2020; Teachman et al, 2020). This approach conceptualises those political and material conditions of what Thomas (2007) terms *disablism* (the institutionalised rejection of disabled people) by attending to material (e.g. body and environment) and immaterial (e.g. emotions and virtual environments) relations in the lives of disabled people that constitute their place in the world. Drawing on this work in critical Disability Studies and some key work outside of our community (e.g. Crook, 2011; Dewsbury, 2011; Fox and Aldred, 2015; Saldanha, 2012; Price-Robertson and Duff, 2016), we are encouraged to consider the ways in which immaterial and material phenomena impact on and affect one another. So, for example, we can understand the wheelchair as having both a material form and a cultural immaterial meaning. We recognise that materiality and immateriality are *entangled* with one another. Hence the wheelchair is a cultural sign for disability (immaterial) and also functions as a prosthetic or machine (material). Immateriality and materiality combine to produce *affects* and *capacities*. The wheelchair is felt as being part of one's body, elicits emotions in the user of the wheelchair and is experienced sensorily as the wheelchair moves the user through the physical environment. And crucially human beings (and the non-human entities which we come into contact with) are *capacitated* through their

interconnections. The posthuman ushers in a different way of thinking about the material and immaterial, the human and the non-human, the biological and the cultural, impairment and disability. Consider the Möbius strip. Think of a plastic wristband, twisted in the middle to form a bow, a little bit like an infinity band. Imagine one side of the band coloured pink (to denote the body) and the other side blue (to denote culture). This depicts, for us, the ways in which posthuman and new materialist perspectives conceptualise the entangled inseparability of the biological and societal; of the body and culture, of the material and immaterial. The posthuman body and mind is one constituted by a mixing and merging of the organic and the manufactured, the given and the created, the physical and the virtual, the body and society, the human and the non-human. We will return to these meldings, interminglings and interconnections throughout our paper as we outline what we have identified as some key concerns. One element of posthuman work currently ongoing within critical Disability Studies relates to what Braidotti (2019, 2020) refers to as development of the 'Missing People's Humanities'. This is a generative interdisciplinary space (spanning the arts, humanities, natural and social sciences) that seeks to consider how human beings – those often living at the margins of society – can inform their inclusion through the development of transformative ideas, theories and practices. The current pandemic accentuates the urgency of developing an inclusive humanities that addresses human exclusion but does so fully cognisant of human beings relations with non-human others. We therefore set out a number of challenges to critical Disability Studies researchers that think through and across various human, animal, machine and environmental interrelations. There will be times when we want to emphasise those humans often excluded from the normative centre of humanities, but this should not detract from a posthuman ethics that theorises with and across the non/human divide.

## 2. Some Key Concerns

We use the rest of the paper to pull out some key contemplations for critical Disability Studies. We consider desire, alliances, non/humans and their implications for conceptualising social justice. This list, of course, is not exhaustive. Nevertheless, we consider these themes to be important as we work in the context of COVID-19. As we explore their nature, we will also pose a number of questions that we think could be picked up in submissions and contributions to the *International Journal of Disability and Social Justice*. Our exploration touches upon what might be framed as theoretical concerns. By pursuing intellectual challenges and possibilities we do so from a perspective that foregrounds social justice. We therefore follow the lead of many foundational Disability Studies theorists who came to the study of disability not because this constituted an interesting topic of inquiry but because of a commitment to challenging various conditions of disability that dehumanised people with sensory, cognitive and physical impairments. The themes of desire, alliances and non/humans constitute thematic priorities that might be used to address wider practices of social justice.



## 2.1 Desire

COVID-19 has created spaces and times to reflect on human desires. Even for those within our community who are living with the greatest restrictions on their liberties and rights – such as those disabled people who are shielding – these unprecedented times have raised important questions about the kinds of desires and pleasures we seek. At the other end of the experiential spectrum, those living more privileged engagements with their surroundings, we have witnessed accounts of reconnection with their immediate environments: WhatsApp groups set up by local residents, a rise in volunteering to offer shopping and support to isolated individuals, a more acute appreciation of one's neighbourhood. Living through a geopolitical moment where many people are dealing with matters of life and death inevitably raises existential questions. What is it that we want? What kind of entities do we long for? To what extent might we have been desiring the wrong kinds of things? How might disability disrupt normative desires? How might we desire disability? These are just some of the kinds of questions of desire that we should be asking as critical Disability Studies scholars.

Sullivan (2008) writes that human desires and fantasies are evaluated through strict, pre-existing normative scripts. Wanting financial success, sating respectable (hetero)sexual desires, grappling with adult autonomy, property ownership and self-sufficiency are but some of the strict normative kinds of desires that are expected. And these desires are prescribed by the widely accepted ideological underpinnings of neoliberal and normative social structures, social policies and educational institutions. Desires are shaped through what Ahmed (2004) terms affect economies: the close association of individual wishes and wants with circulating narratives of consumption and capital.

To desire dependency or disability jars with these taken-for-granted, common-sensical narratives of desire. To long for disability feels perverted, misplaced, aberrant, anarchic and definitely psycho-pathological (Sullivan, 2008). Dependency and disability are often conceptualised as sides of the same ideological coin, so desires trained on disability/dependence do not play well in societies that normalise ability/independence. Fortunately, critical Disability Studies scholars have challenged 'normative ethics insofar as they presuppose (and reiterate) a distinction between good and bad, moral and immoral, proper and improper, healthy and sick modes (and objects) of desire and, by association, the kinds of relationships they (allegedly) produce' (Sullivan, 2008, p.185). By foregrounding disability as the starting place from which to think again about human desire, we might entertain more inclusive, expansive and less restrictive conceptions. The impact of crip theory has been so influential in this reconfiguring of desire (e.g. McRuer, 2006). Crip desires, often heavily allied to queer desires, decentre normative pleasures and draw in potentially more inclusive wants, wishes and objects. Examples of crip potential include Shildrick's (2007, 2009) illumination of the dangerous discourses associated with re-establishing the disabled body as a place from which to reconsider sensuality, connection and care; Puar's (2009) appropriation of the phenomenon of debility as

a new body politik around which to politically organise, which recognises and challenges capital's tendencies to ruin and ravage our body-minds; McRuer's (2006) notion of the profoundly disabled, which turns the typically pathological and excessive understanding of profound disability into a new affirmative category through which we might find generative relationships, encounters and desires created by the presence of disability; Thornton's (2019) celebration of crip time as a means to disrupt and pause a neoliberal emphasis on constant performance and production; and, of course, the influential work of Kafer (2013), which rejoices in the possibilities of performance and politics of bodies and minds energised by their queer and crip potential. These examples demonstrate what might be gained through desiring disability differently. At the most basic level, this work reminds us that desire should be broadened to include more embodied, productive, sensual, sensuous and intimate pleasures (Loeser et al, 2018). However, while this crippling of desire is to be celebrated, we do want to offer a few words of caution.

When lockdown hit the UK in March 2020 and those of us lucky enough to keep their jobs switched from the office to the kitchen to participate in online/distance meetings, a common thread of discussion on social media was how welcome these new, more informal, work practices were. Gone were the hours sat in cars and trains commuting to work. Awful alarm calls in the early hours were switched from dawn to a more respectable 7.30am. Attendance increased as meetings shifted to online; colleagues apparently revelling in the flexibility of working from home. True, some ten months on and the novelty has worn off for many; especially when people feel they are working harder than ever. These concerns feel less important when we acknowledge that many disabled people have lost access to their communities, denied opportunities for paid or voluntary work and experience their everyday lives with a sense of impending dread. Many disabled people live in fear of COVID-19: shielding themselves and their loved ones. The deep irony of flexible online working is that disabled people have been calling for decades for more enabling kinds of work practices (even prior to the digital revolution). So now, just as capitalism needs it, it seems that employers can suddenly give up on office presenteeism and embrace the online. Moreover, while non-disabled people might extol the virtues of working from home, many disabled people have no choice. We must recognise that over the last decade many disabled people around the world have been rendered house-bound, isolated and dependent upon family as a consequence of years of austerity and a retrenchment of welfare services (Bylund, 2020).

While crip configurations of desire need to be energised, we should not ignore the fact that disabled people continue to be denied access to normative desires for childhood play (Holt et al, 2012), to be educated (Slee, 2018), to be employed and paid (Grover and Soldatic, 2013) and to consume (Dubost, 2018). At the most personal level, most of us desire regular opportunities for intimacy, sex and love (Liddiard, 2014, 2018; Brown, 2020). While our trajectories towards such normative pleasures often involve very crip practices – such as drawing on personal

assistance, prosthetics and distributed forms of bodily engagement – being crip remains a ‘hip practice’ for some and a distanced practice for others (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2013). What is required, then, is a bifurcated analysis that simultaneously engages with the normative and crip registers of desire – to simultaneously acknowledge the possibilities offered by disability to reshape and re-fashion the human (crip ambitions) while at the same time asserting disabled people’s place within common humanity (normative desires) (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2016). This raises a number of considerations. These include opening up human desire as a realm through which to embrace the aspirations of disabled people. We would urge an investigation of the ways in which pleasure is both normatively structured but disrupted by the presence of disability. We should contemplate the ways in which we might move desire out of a heteronormative and ableist register, thus responding to the urge for the development of the Missing Posthumanities (Braidotti, 2019, 2020). In these endeavours we should always be mindful of any attempts to psychologise or pathologise human desire.

## 2.2 Alliances

We believe that Critical Disability Studies start with disability but do not necessarily end with disability (Goodley, 2014). An openness to diverse theoretical positions is likely to invite an engagement with a plethora of identity positions and political persuasions. Over the last two decades we have witnessed the emergence of bodies of knowledge associated with intersectional politics including feminist, Black, queer and trans Disability Studies. It is important not to confuse alliance with some kind of unproblematic union or a smooth coming-together of ideas. Raced, sexualised, sexed, classed, disabled and gendered identities each carry with them complex histories of oppression. Indeed, even within the specific category of disability it is possible to identify a further layer of sub-categories of impairment. Each of these more precise definitions – or impairment-specific categories – boast their own aetiologies, origin stories and predilections. Alliances are never easy; they provoke tensions. Rather than seeking to smooth over differences, Critical Disability Studies should embrace these frictions. Criticality involves opening up one’s thinking to reflexively account for some of the connections and differences that are raised by disability’s intersectional politics. One of the key motifs of posthuman Disability Studies is the notion of entanglements: those complex meldings, knots and mixings of different human positions and predicaments. There are many to consider, far too many than can be captured in a paper of this length, so we seek to focus on two alliances, Trans+ and Black Disability Studies.

The coming together of Trans+ and Disability Studies and politics is, we think, a particular strength of Critical Disability Studies (e.g. Mog and Swarr, 2008; Baril, 2015; Thornton, 2019). Disabled and trans people continue to occupy marginalised places in society, are subjected to endless questions of ontological validation about the status of their trans/disabled identities and risk being pulled into a host of psychological, medical and psychiatric spaces as they transition through life. In Slater

and Liddiard's (2018, p.90) discursive paper on the links between trans and disability politics they urge Disability Studies colleagues 'to ask critical questions of themselves and their own scholarly and activist movements, practices and responsibilities towards mitigating the impacts of trans misogyny and transphobia and acknowledging trans disabled people's lives'. One way in which we might seriously question our positionality relates to involving ourselves in debates about self-identification and categorisations of trans and disabled identities. In recent years we have witnessed a revitalisation of biologicistic understandings of gender which equate sex with biology. The social media interjections of high-profile individuals such as JK Rowling – who have argued for a valuing of 'real women' (or natal women) – have pulled trans politics into the mainstream media. This media representation risks simplifying the nuances and complexities of debates as arguments move both back and forth between sex as biology and sex as self-identified. Some of these debates have been categorised as taking place between Trans activists and TERFs (where the latter is referred to as trans-exclusionary radical feminists). Pearce et al (2020, p.678) remind us that:

*the trans/feminist conflicts we refer to as the 'TERF wars' reflect the current conditions of our time in which public discourse is dominated by political polarisation, deepened by the proliferation of misinformation and distrust in 'experts' whose knowledge may not speak to individuals' cultural common sense.*

In short, the history, meaning and components of the debate are deeply complex. One thematic that appears to have some consistency to the arguments of TERFs is the assertion of 'women's sex-based rights'. This concept is used in ways that 'emphasise the distinction of sex (as 'biological' or material reality) from gender (as social role or ideology)' (Pearce et al, 2020, p.679). Womanhood, Pearce (2019) states, is often assumed to exist by drawing upon some narrow, exclusionary and naturalised category of woman evidenced by the presence of reproductive potential, feminised embodiment and XX chromosomes. These natural/ised qualities are not, of course, universal. But the tacit acceptance of them as biological place holders for the identification of the category of woman means that some women are in danger of never entering the categorical fray. In contrast, Pearce (2019) argues that trans self-identification is the only practical means by which we can possibly define a gender identity.

These debates resonate with Critical Disability Studies arguments. For years, two camps have emerged; those who advocate for the real, natural and biological bases of impairment (for example, those associated with the biologism of medicalised, psychologised and individualised perspectives) versus the camp that align themselves with more socially constructed, discursively constituted and self-defined understandings of impairment (elaborated upon by some of the foundational models of disability including social, cultural and minority approaches). While disability scholars are not immune to these impairment-as-real or socially constructed distinctions that mirror the debates within trans studies, we also occupy a shared political space that appears to side with one perspective over the other. It is worth reminding ourselves that the very origins of disability activism were based upon activists' self-identification as disabled people

(Campbell and Oliver, 1996). To be part of the disability movement one had to self-identify as disabled. This was (and remains) an explicit political strategy, where disabled people took back the power of diagnosis, away from experts and placed it in the jurisdiction of disabled people. So, how are we to retain this emphasis on self-definition and identification at a time where we are witnessing the repackaging and reassertion of naturalised understandings of gender? One response lies in exploring the extent to which the biological/sociological impairment debates of Critical Disability Studies take on even more significance in light of the threats posed to trans identities by the TERF wars. We believe that there has never been a greater need than now for disability activists to align themselves with trans activists; especially around the importance of self-definition. The key issue, though, relates to disability scholars ensuring that they are listening and responding to the ambitions of trans activists (and vice versa for that matter).

In analysing trans and disabled identities, Baril (2015) deploys a debility theory analysis (drawing on the work of Puar, 2009, 2014). They assert that disabled and trans people have the potential and the opportunity to come together under the banner of debility oppression and politicisation. This recognises shared but also diverse experiences of interventionist medical practices and re/habilitative therapies, exclusionary educational experiences, hostile environments and structural violence. The pain of oppression is felt phenomenologically but, equally, so is resistance. Hence, while finding common ground in relation to systemic discrimination, this opens up possibilities for alliances to be made. And one of the key moments of alliance is to celebrate self-definition of debility and the personal and political consequences of such an affirming moment of identification (that takes place regardless of the machinations of biologicistic or TERF discourses). While this new debility politics sounds attractive, we wonder what becomes of disability as a category of mobilisation and activism (see Goodley, 2014; Shildrick, 2015). Questions should be raised about the relative benefits of organising under the banner of debility. This is an especially important project when one addresses the relationship between disability and Black studies.

It would be fair to assert that as long as there have been studies of disability then there have been calls for Black Disability Studies (e.g. Stuart, 1993; Vernon, 1996; Asch, 2001; Bell, 2006, 2011; Franzino, 2016). Much of what passes as Disability Studies implicitly assumes whiteness and risks white-washing the phenomenon of disabled people. We agree with these critiques and posit here that there remains an urgent need within our community to foreground the ambitions of Black Disability Studies. Dunham et al's (2015) piece provides a very useful starting point for grounding a rethink of key considerations. This article emerged out of a collection of writing that has grown from the work of the National Black Disability Coalition (NBD) in their States. The authors insist that Black Disability Studies perspectives should not be 'stirred in' into the existing mix of theorising. Instead, these approaches should have a disruptive and subversive impact on existing orthodoxies. Alliances can create contestations in relation to certain doxa that remain implicit and under-theorised in our

intellectual work. In British Disability Studies there is a legacy of non-Marxist analysis that adopted class-based politics of industrial capitalism. While this approach plays well in the British context, there is a danger of white-washing our localised understandings of disability politics. Furthermore, Black Disability Studies have the potential to decolonise intellectual work. While the social model of disability, for example, has been incredibly productive and influential, we have to acknowledge that its impetus reflects a global north metropolitan perspective (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009). Alliance requires de-settlement; a sense of starting again or at the very least refreshing our cultural imaginaries. An example here would relate to Black Lives Matter as not only a necessary intervention into the racist status quo (which implicitly values white lives) but also as a moment or connection with disability politics. The recent *Crip Camp* documentary on Netflix provides a timely reminder of the interconnection of Black and Disability politics in North America. The current support of disabled activists in relation to Black Lives Matter is a significant reminder that the cultural logics of whiteness work alongside those associated with ableism. Whiteness and able-bodied-and-mindness co-exist as key elements of neoliberal-ableism: the valuing of able, productive and white bodies in our contemporary times (Goodley, 2014). The opposite is also true. As Annamma et al (2018, p.47) assert: ‘race and disability are not only deeply linked with other social locations’ but that ‘racism and ableism, intersecting with additional oppressions, often have serious and sometimes deadly implications’.

When disabled and Black young people remain amongst the most excluded and discarded people in the educational institutions of North America and the UK (see also Annamma et al, 2013), there are real dangers in our analytical frameworks and research ventures failing to trouble these stubborn incidents of dehumanisation. Aligning with Black Disability Studies offers up some key considerations for Critical Disability Studies – including the need to unpack the logics of whiteness and their associations with ableism – that undergird mainstream theories of disability. If this journal is truly to be international then it must represent perspectives developed in the majority world; many of which begin with Black Disability Studies perspective (Grech and Soldatic, 2016; Black and Stienstra, 2016). We also need to unpack the extent to which critical theories of disability foreground considerations of colonialism, racism and imperialism. This will involve exploring the ways in which various theories of disability intersect with the priorities of critical race and postcolonial scholars. We have suggested in a recent paper (Goodley et al, 2020) that posthuman Disability Studies provides one dynamic space for pursuing a project that salvages ‘a re-enchanted human’ (Gilroy, 2018). For Gilroy, any re-engagement with the human category – especially one that addresses the historical exclusion of blackness – must pursue ‘a cautious, post-humanist humanism’ capable of grasping the relationship between ‘human and non-human’ worlds (Gilroy, 2018, p.16). A posthuman perspective recognises that any project associated with human emancipation cannot be separated from ecological, environmental and technological concerns. This is a concern we turn to in the next section.

## 2.3 Non-Humans

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that human beings are deeply dependent upon a coexistence with animals, machines, environments and other humans. This human–non-human complex has been understood as more than human, as inter-species, as *posthuman* (Braidotti, 2019): a mix of human and non-human interrelations and connections. As Hobson-West and Jutel (2019) assert, any understanding of human health and well-being must also connect with the lives of non-human animals and machines and our relations with them (Hobson-West and Jutel, 2019). There is a long running trope throughout disability scholarship that has decentred the human in order to demonstrate more extended human and non-human subjectivities and embodiments. There is a growing multitude of activists that organise around diverse political interests. Mladenov (2016, p.1227) gives the example of Leap Manifesto, a campaigning tool promoting social and environmental justice in Canada, that ‘weaves together measures intended to rectify injustices suffered by the planet, indigenous peoples, women, workers, migrants and refugees’. While this is impressive, the concerns of disabled people are not mentioned. In this section we focus on two aspects of non-human life – animals and machines – that have the potential to offer productive connections with disability theory and practice. We should acknowledge here that theorisations of animals and machines – and their relationship with disabled people – are not without their controversies. For example, Reeve (2012) warns against becoming so entranced by technology that we risk ignoring some of the more problematic rehabilitative aspirations of designers, manufacturers and users. We need to ward against technophilia. In addition, Vehmas and Watson (2016) express concerns about the posthuman blurring of animal and human worlds, which they suggest might lower the human and moral worth of people with profound impairments (especially when we subvert the human/animal hierarchy). We acknowledge these challenges but also are convinced by a posthuman attitude that seeks alliance with non-human others.

Animal Studies is a rapidly growing area of interdisciplinary scholarship that, intriguingly, has some consistent connections with studies of disability. Examples include Michalko’s (1999) now classic piece on his living with his guide dog and Shildrick’s (2009) clarion call for a celebration of the disabled body’s demands for expansive networks, nurturing relations and nourishing interdependencies. Taylor’s (2011, 2017) recent work, bringing together alliances between disabled humans and animals, demonstrates with nuance and care the tensions and commonalities that emerge at this intersection of human and non-human animal life (see also Jenkins et al, 2020). For Lönngren (2020), there are vital on-going discussions in the area of intimacies and pleasure in the relationship between humans and non-human animals. While disabled people and non-human animals have always shared close relationships, there has been a wariness within the disability field around connecting closely to animal studies (see Grue and Lundblad, 2019). This wariness can be explained in terms of the centrality of humanist distinctions between, to use the terms of Taylor, man and beast. The dehumanisation and animalisation of disabled



people have been the central planks for practices of institutionalisation, abuse, neglect, exclusion and disavowal historically experienced by disabled people. Recent re-engagements with animal–human relations have been incredibly fruitful. Taylor’s work may be characterised by an explicit anti-humanist human alliance with non-human animals predicated upon the shared experience of being excluded by humanism. When disabled people and non-human animals are rejected on the basis of their sub-human or beastly qualities, this raises alarm bells in relation to aligning with a narrow and exclusionary construction of the human being. During COVID-19 companion animals increased in their value to human beings; in terms of offering comfort and support as well as (seemingly) limited opportunities to those humans who perambulate to leave the lockdown hell of their homes. Nevertheless, the ownership of animals reveals some discomfiting practices and beliefs. Similarly, Michalko’s (1999) text, which captures a number of human/animal intimacies and connections, eventually raises some difficult questions about the ways in which humans work animals in some exploitative ways. That said, we know that human/animal connections can offer so much – to both parties – especially when in terms of love, affection and support (Whitney et al, 2019). We would suggest that Critical Disability Studies would benefit from how human and animal relations can be developed and maintained in ways bound upon a shared ethic of care. And, in relation to this point, disabled people’s relationships with animals offer an opportunity to consider obligations and responsibilities. This will involve moving in-between the human and animal as desirable categories of recognition. And there is no doubt that while technologies might humanise disabled people, questions are raised about the obligations humans have to technology.

Science and Technology Studies and Critical Disability Studies have long probed the porous boundaries between the wetware of bodies and the hardware of technologies. Reeve (2012) and Christie and Bloustien (2010) capture but two playful examples of this kind of theorising, deploying the concepts of iCrip and I-cyborg in order to interrogate the possibly transformative potential of human/machine hybrids. The futuristic possibilities that are captured by the image of the cyborg – when used in relation to disabled people – have both affirmative and negating impacts. For Christie and Bloustine (2010), technological interventions such as cochlear implants might be viewed as offering certain human beings the chance to evolve into cyborgs: an identity position that contrasts markedly with more specialist discourses that reductively understand technological interventions as shifting people from disability (Deafness) to normality (reductions in hearing loss). Kath et al (2019) make the important point that technological enhancement is better understood as being socially produced rather than being linked to the fixing of some kind of inherent dysfunctionality of the disabled person. Because a posthuman conception of technological and human entanglement understands this as an element of what it means to be human in the contemporary moment, there is the potential to de-fetishise and normalise these interconnections. Such a conceptual move is incredibly important to Critical Disability Studies, not least in



placing disabled people alongside others who utilise technology as part of their everyday existence. However, technological interventions should never be viewed as neutral nor benign. The history of technological intervention in the lives of disabled people has largely been associated with the restoration of normality (Oliver, 1990). The statement from Meyer and Asbrock (2018, p.1) perfectly captures the paradox of technological enhancement. They write: ‘the increasing proliferation of bionic technologies (e.g., bionic arm and leg prostheses, exo-skeletons, retina implants, etc.) has the potential to change stereotypes toward people with physical disabilities: The portrayal of people who use such devices in the media and popular culture is typically characterized by portraying them as competent – sometimes even more competent than able-bodied individuals’. We should be concerned with this so-called technological ‘potential’. There are dangers then that technologies neutralise the very existence of disability. Such a view smacks of eugenics and endangers any crip or disability activism to desire disability. We would argue that there is an urgent need to interrogate posthuman conceptualisations to check on their rehabilitative and normative assumptions.

One way of contemplating the connections of animals, machines and humans is to turn critically to a well-worn concept within this field; the assemblage. Price-Robertson and Duff (2016, pp.61–62) describe an assemblage in terms of the ‘conceptual *mélanges* of the material and the discursive whereby texts, discourses, bodies, affects, technologies, non-human “things,” and physical and social contexts combine’. The very idea of an assemblage seeks to address the oftentimes superficial and artificial distinctions between the real/ideal, material/immaterial, object/subject, human/non-human. Applied to the human being the concept of the assemblage recognises – from the very outset – that humans are deeply complex hybridised non/human phenomenon. We are organic, digital, technological, environmental, social, biological, animal, human, economic and cultural political entities; now more than ever. Disabled young people are, we would argue, at the forefront of these considerations. They are the quintessential posthuman subject (Goodley et al, 2014). Consider disabled young people’s mundane, ordinary and daily engagements with different forms of specialist and mainstream technologies. Note the presence of various material objects in their lives from wheelchairs to iPhones. Acknowledge the co-presence of services, professionals, care-givers, allies and family members in their everyday lives. Pay attention to disabled young people’s relationships with animals in their homes, their leisure activities and as sources of assistance and support. In making these somewhat superficial observations of the lives of disabled young people we start to recognise their often very complex, sophisticated and rich assemblages.

Assemblage analysis has been deployed in a whole host of human and social sciences, arts and humanities contexts. For example, in archaeological research, assemblage analysis has emphasised the form, fabric and decoration of material objects in given historical periods (Crook, 2011). This might include an analysis of value and quality; an appreciation, for example, of the quality or disposability of material objects. Here quality is understood as a measure of material property.

Hence, a coffee mug is an assemblage of form, fabric and decoration imbued with value, a sense of quality and, of course, function. Assemblage analysis within the human and social sciences recognises the ways in which individuals, groups, governments, nation states and supranational entities are made up of many constituent parts. As Price-Robertson and Duff (2016, p.63) argue, ‘assemblages have material dimensions or components (e.g., spaces, objects, technologies, bodies) and expressive ones (e.g., identities, signs, affects, desires)’. An assemblage analysis is engaged with questions of capacity and function: what do the various elements of the assemblage permit that assemblage to actually *do*? We are interested in the various dimensions and components that permit disabled people to *function* in the world. We are interested in understanding how components and expressive elements *capacitate*: how the elements of the assemblage interact with one another to permit (or prevent) disabled young people to function well in the world. While discussion of the rights of animals and machines is entirely in keeping with a posthuman ethics, there are potential risks in downplaying the human rights of disabled people. We need to consider the extent to which disabled people are included in the categories of ‘cyborg haves and have nots’ (Kath et al, 2019). Might we be able to develop conceptual registers that fully include disabled people as posthuman subjects whilst also remaining mindful of the need to fund specialist low- and high-tech solutions that promotes their inclusion in wider society? There are clear dangers in being seduced by the posthuman condition when disabled people already experience digital and technological exclusion.

### 3. Social Justice

Our paper, thus far, has considered some key thematics for Critical Disability Studies. We began the paper by reflecting on the predicaments of living through a pandemic. We worried away at the challenges this poses to our connections with the Disability Studies community. We made an argument for occupying an intellectual space that we defined as Critical Disability Studies; an interdisciplinary space for art, activism and research representing many different theoretical, political and methodological perspectives. In order to focus the paper, we made reference to posthuman Disability Studies literature; a rapidly growing and popular area of theorisation. We suggest that this broad perspective supports us to address a strange paradox of humankind – where our species is enhanced by science and augmented by technology but also threatened by the impacts of our destructive actions on the planet – and constitutes an urgent problem for researchers. In particular, a posthuman approach might support us in the development of a ‘Missing People’s Humanities’. This is a generative interdisciplinary space (spanning the arts, humanities, natural and social sciences) that seeks to consider how human beings – those often living at the margins of society – can inform their inclusion through the development of transformative ideas, theories and practices. Our paper explored the themes of desire, alliances and non/humans; thematic priorities that might be used to address wider practices of social justice.

Our exploration of desire informed a positionality in which we advocate for an investigation of the ways in which pleasure is both normatively structured but also disrupted by the presence of disability. While we are excited by and cognisant of the radical associated with crippling desire, we hold a contrary position that recognises more normative desires. We should seek to solve this paradox, but instead work with the frictional demands of crip and normative desires. This recognition of the need to work with tensions was followed up in the discussion of our second theme of alliances. We suggested that one of the key motifs of posthuman Disability Studies is the notion of entanglements: those complex meldings, knots and mixings of different human positions and predicaments. We focused on Trans+ and Black Disability Studies and made a case for self-definition as a means of building alliances whilst also remaining mindful of the dangers of white-washing Critical Disability Studies; a community that has too often been informed by the logics of heteronormativity. Our discussion moved onto the theme of the non/human; building on a long running trope throughout disability scholarship that has decentred the human in order to demonstrate more extended human and non-human subjectivities and embodiments. We discussed the exciting influence of a growing multitude of activists that organise around diverse political interests. And our focus on animals and machines, though sometimes controversial, provides a chance to broaden our intellectual and political ambitions. We want to consider in this concluding section of this paper how these reflections might affect how we understand social justice. While COVID-19 has hit every human kind it has impacted upon some groups of people more than others, including BAME, older and vulnerable people and those with underlying health conditions. The inequitable roll out of the pandemic raises serious issues about how we, as a society, redress these social, cultural and health inequalities. One should always ask how we understand injustice and the extent to which human and non-human factors are included in our conceptions of injustice. Perhaps most importantly, there is an urgency in excavating how we define and practice social justice. Human diversity creates a number of human categories. As these categories proliferate and gain purchase in the world, they shine light on the ways in which we value, support and advocate for one another, especially for those who live on the margins of society.

Disability scholars of social justice deploy a host of theoretical persuasions. Terzi (2005) draws on the capability approaches of Amarta Sen and Martha Nussbaum to explore social justice in the lives of disabled people. Social justice for Terzi relates to a number of key practices, including involving disabled people in democratic decision-making and building environments that promote the full capacities and functionings of disabled people. This centralisation of disabled people as key players in the search for mechanisms for inclusion is taken up by Polat (2011), who expresses anxieties around the lack of representation and engagement of disabled people. Mladenov (2016) uses the ideas of Nancy Fraser to propose a reconfiguration of resources that are available to disabled people, thus increasing their recognition within wider society. One strategy relates to a rejection of an emphasis

on self-sufficiency within society (a dominant trope of neoliberal societies), instead exposing and extolling the virtues of our inherent interdependencies. While these previous conceptualisations of social justice remain incredibly important, we advocate an approach that recognises the ways in which disabled people's emancipation is tied intimately to a host of human and non-human interrelations.

Attending to a host of interdependent assemblages – that bind the individual to their wider environment – is especially important, we would argue, to a posthuman theory of social justice. Following Cohn and Lynch (2017, p.287), such an approach 'lifts out' non-human elements (from their relegated positions within social theory) and 'places them on the same level as human beings'. If social justice has a very human feel to it – based as it often is on anthropocentric models of law, equity and accountability – a posthuman approach offers a *relational emphasis*: bringing together questions about the sustainability of the animal, plant, human, environment, digital and machine. This is not to totally relegate the human nor social justice for human beings because 'posthuman perspectives are not about leaving what is human behind, but in fact the opposite – exploring what being human means in relation to what might be deemed as not human' (Cohn and Lynch, 2017, p.289). Too often contemporary scholarship tends to respond to the *divergent* interests and plights of animals (animal studies, animal ethics, anti-humanism), humans (indigenous, Black, queer, trans, feminist, disability, working class studies), machines (science and technology studies, AI and robotics, digital humanities) and environments (World Earth, urban, environmental and development studies, blue/green/wet humanities). We also advocate a *convergent* model of social justice; integrating these perspectives to explore the productive alliances, sustainable assemblages and affirmative connections that exist between humans and non-humans in these unprecedented economic, climatic and political times. Our approach engages with timely academic articulations of human and non-human life, which have been described as the 'Critical Posthumanities' (Braidotti, 2013, 2019). This posthuman programme of social justice would:

- *Draw in philosophical, political, social, artistic, historical and cultural understandings that embrace animals, machines, humans and environments as key actors in our interrelations that sustain the human and other species.*
- *Interrogate the co-presence, co-habitation and expansive entanglements of humans and non-humans for the purpose of building more sustainable and convivial futures.*
- *Seek historical understandings of how we got here, to take stock of the present and consider future possibilities for sustaining human and non-human relations.*
- *Support studies in Global North and Global South contexts in order to broaden our remit.*
- *Promote positive understandings of the complex, multi-faceted, multi-layered and embedded interconnections, collaborations and capacities of human and non-human interrelations.*

In adopting such a programme we would hope that social justice agendas remain absolutely central to Critical Disability Studies scholarship; at a time when the pandemic threatens to push political matters off the supra-national agenda. We must ready ourselves post-COVID-19 times: where Critical Disability Studies arts, activism

and research necessarily engage with the desires, alliances and connections of disabled people, their families and allies.

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