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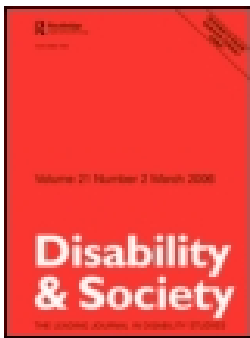
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## Provocations for Critical Disability Studies

Dan Goodley<sup>a</sup> , Rebecca Lawthom<sup>b</sup>, Kirsty Liddiard<sup>a</sup> and Katherine Runswick-Cole<sup>a</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK; <sup>b</sup>Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article posits a number of provocations for scholars and researchers engaged with Critical Disability Studies. We summarise some of the analytical twists and turns occurring over the last few years that create a number of questions and concerns. We begin by introducing Critical Disability Studies; describing it as an interdisciplinary field of scholarship building on foundational disability studies theories. Critical Disability Studies scholarship is being produced at an exponential rate and we assert that we need to take pause for thought. We lay out five provocations to encourage reflection and debate: what is the purpose of Critical Disability Studies; how inclusive is Critical Disability Studies; is disability the object or subject of studies; what matters or gets said about disability; and how can we attend to disability and ability? We conclude by making a case for a reflexive and politicised Critical Disability Studies.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Critical Disability Studies; theory; materialism; poststructuralism; ownership

### Points of interest

- This article introduces and discusses the field of Critical Disability Studies.
- Critical Disability Studies thinking has developed in some controversial and complex ways over the years.
- We review some of these developments and pose five questions that we think are urgently needed to be addressed by Critical Disability Studies researchers.
- Our questions are: what is the purpose of Critical Disability Studies; how inclusive is Critical Disability Studies; is disability the object or subject of studies; what matters or gets said about disability; and how can we attend to disability and ability?

**CONTACT** Dan Goodley  [d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk)

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- Our hope is that by asking these five questions we might provoke researchers to consider the impact of theory and thinking on the future of Critical Disability Studies writing and scholarship.

## Introduction

To contemplate disability is to consider a politicised phenomenon framed by precarity, crisis and uncertainty (Jones 2018). Of course, political upheaval, peripheral community participation and economic uncertainty have been an ever-present experience for the most marginalised members of society. Also, we know that many of the world's poorest are concentrated in Global South spaces. Of the one billion disabled people across the globe, most live in the majority world (World Health Organization and The World Bank 2011). To contemplate disability is to scrutinise inequality. Disabled people's organisations posit a simple but powerful idea: disability is a phenomenon associated with the discrimination of people with sensory, physical and cognitive impairments (Oliver and Barnes 2012). Disability is not a flaw, an individual tragedy nor a whispered recognition of another's embodied failing or a shameful family truth. Disability is a matter of public discourse and international disgrace, exemplified in the continued exclusion of impaired children from mainstream schools (Slee 2018), the segregation of disabled adults from employment contexts (Beyer et al. 2016) and the denial of access to basic human rights as a consequence of reducing welfare and essential services (World Health Organization and The World Bank 2011). It could be argued that research and theory on disability have never been more needed.

The politics of disability continue to reveal the very conditions of inequity that blight the human condition. This is not to say that disability embodies human failing. Rather, it is to acknowledge the precarious positions occupied by disabled people in societies blighted by disablism: the exclusion of a people with sensory, physical and cognitive impairments (Thomas 2007). But, of course, disability is so much more than this. Disability politics, arts, scholarship and culture offer new ways of conceiving and living life, existing with one another and recreating communities that include, augment and emphasise the qualities we all hold as human beings. Disability is both a signifier of inequity and the promise of something new and affirmative. It is these in-built contradictory qualities that have given rise to the study of disability: which forms the subject and object of disability research and scholarship.

For three decades the field of disability studies has produced a body of theoretical work that is, broadly speaking, counter-hegemonic to dominant understandings of disability. Hegemonic framings of disability individualise, pathologise, medicalise, psychologise, essentialise and depoliticise the phenomenon of disability. In contrast, disability studies theory has re-sited

disability as an object through which to understand the workings of capitalist society, a political category around which to mobilise, a rich phenomenon produced through social and cultural practices, an identity around which to politically organise, a cultural script marked by processes of normalisation and an ontological experience ever shaped by a host of external factors (see Oliver 1990; Barnes 1991; Davis 1995; Morris 1996; Wendell 1996; Garland Thomson 1997; Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999; Barnes and Mercer 1997, 2003; Charlton 2006; Mitchell and Snyder 2006; Thomas 1999, 2007; Oliver and Barnes 2012). This work has emerged across diverse disciplines of the arts, humanities and the social sciences – influencing the human, medical and psychological sciences – and has given rise to terminology that has trickled down into everyday parlance associated with minority, social, cultural and right models of disability.

Over the last decade we have witnessed the rise of Critical Disability Studies (for example, Shildrick 2004, 2007, 2012; Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009; Goodley 2012, 2014, 2016; Mallett and Runswick-Cole 2014; Liasidou 2014; Vanderkinderen, Roets, and Van Hove 2014; Moeller 2015; Slater 2015; Feely 2016; Flynn 2017; Peers 2017; Rice et al. 2017; Slater, Jones, and Procter 2017; Liddiard 2018). This interdisciplinary field has built upon the early work of disability studies and produced a body of contemporary knowledge that boasts sophistication and nuance. This is not to say that disability studies theory before the critical turn was basic or simplistic. Theory has always been dense. One only needs to read early neo-Marxist critiques of disability and capitalism to witness this complexity (for example, Oliver 1990; Gleeson 1999). What Critical Disability Studies has done is to welcome in a smorgasbord of perspectives drawn from inside and outside of the disability experience.

Critical Disability Studies is a 'location populated by people who advocate building upon the foundational perspectives of disability studies whilst integrating new and transformative agendas associated with postcolonial, queer and feminist theories' (Goodley 2016, 190–191). This merging of epistemological perspectives and ontological desires has created a rich tapestry of concepts and frameworks. In particular, we would pinpoint postconventionalist, poststructuralist, postcolonial, feminist, queer and crip theories as having particular purchase on Critical Disability Studies theorisations (for example, Shildrick 2009; McRuer 2006; Erevelles 2012). Nevertheless, as scholarship is produced at what seems to be an exponential rate, we feel there is a need to take pause for thought. We use this article to reflect on the current state of Critical Disability Studies. We present five provocations that pick up on some of the theoretical trajectories of Critical Disability Studies. We consider their purpose, some of the applications and implications, and make explicit some of the troubling questions that they leave us with. Following Michalko

(2018) we aim to sit with these provocations (in order to invite debate and reflection) rather than, necessarily, pursuing definitive answers (an exercise that, at times, seeks easy ripostes). This is a discursive piece of writing that invites debate, reflexivity and uncertainty. Our provocations are generated from our own partial review of a number of theoretical twists and turns that have occurred over the last few years in this interdisciplinary space of Critical Disability Studies, that in their own way create a number of challenges for disability theory.

This article does not seek to develop new theoretical ground but, instead, to necessarily reflect on the theoretical status quo of Critical Disability Studies, the potentials and the pitfalls, and some of the debates and controversies. Provocation 1 – what is the purpose of theory? – asks why we might want to theorise disability and for what reasons. We survey the aims of Critical Disability Studies and introduce some concerns that we have with this interdisciplinary field of inquiry. Provocation 2 – how inclusive is Critical Disability Studies? – considers the interplay of nation, place and the reproduction of disability theory. We detail what happens to theory when it suffers from a within-nation self-referentiality and fails to engage with other geopolitical spaces. We grapple with the urgent need for Critical Disability Studies scholars to communicate with rather than across one another. Provocation 3 – is disability the object or subject of studies? – contemplates the extent to which disability is the driving subject of social theorisation or the curiosity object of theory. When disability is evoked as an object of interest to think about the world, what is given and what is lost in such an evocation? Provocation 4 – what matters or gets said about disability? – considers recent developments in poststructuralism, posthumanism and new materialism and their relative impact on Critical Disability Studies theory. The emergence of Critical Disability Studies was driven, in part, by a strong poststructuralist tradition that rearticulated disability as a cultural and discursive politics. This discursive turn has not happened without criticism. In recent years, researchers have suggested we now live in a time of new materialism, postmaterialism, the extra-discursive, the pre social and the post social. What are the consequences of these new theorisations of the material and the discursive? Provocation 5 – how can we attend to disability and ability? – considers the balancing act of consecutively theorising ability and disability. We reflect on established theories of disability and disablism alongside nascent critical studies of ability and ableism. This raises interesting dilemmas around how we might hold this dual interest without watering down the politics of disability on which studies of disability were based. We conclude our article by making a case for a reflexive and politicised Critical Disability Studies.

### **Provocation 1: what is the purpose of theory?**

A key purpose of theory is to understand and intervene in the social world. This alliance to praxis is retained within Critical Disability Studies by acknowledging and building upon the foundational work of studies of disability. The word 'critical' denotes a qualitative shift in studies of disability from the established to the new; from the orthodox to the evolving; from the specific to the expansive. The latter point recognises the importance of intersectional thinking (Crenshaw 1991; Moodley and Graham 2015) that works through mutual processes of exclusion associated with – and the frictional impact on – multiple identities (around race, ethnicity, gender, sex/sexuality, age, class, nation and, of course, disability). Hidden within the move towards a critical kind of disability studies is the implicit notion that what went on before was all well and good (and of its time) but now is the time for new ideas and affiliations (to be critical). Such a move is, we would assert, inevitable. As activism and politics grow, disperse, fragment and spread out into numerous lines of flight, scholarly responses to such movements are required. Trans and disability politics, to cite an example, have enjoyed many recent generative debates and alliances that were just not there a decade ago (for example, Clare 2010; Slater et al. 2007, 2008; Slater and Liddiard 2018). Critical Disability Studies has to be an interdisciplinary field that is fit for purpose today (and going forward into the future). And theories generated should also be fit for purpose. But this should not demean, simplify or ignore what has gone on before. One would hope that critical studies of disability retain ontological memories and honour epistemological origins of earlier theoretical contributions that drew attention to disability's political, cultural and sociological character. Critical Disability Studies is self-critical and reflexive. This critical framework, following Goodley (2016, 191–192), has a number of key elements. The first acknowledges the potency of foundational materialist analyses that became known as the social model of disability. As we consider later on in this article, the materiality of disability remains a key concern for disability activists and researchers alike. The second recognises the contributions of feminist, queer, postcolonial and critical race scholarship to the field. These perspectives were not represented in early iterations of disability studies and their inclusion offers novel and unique insights. The third takes seriously our contemporary times which are marked by austerity, a widening gap between rich and poor, globalisation of the guiding principles of late capitalism and therefore requiring sophisticated social theories that can make sense and contest these processes. Contemporary social theory, if it is to offer anything, has to be attuned to the complexities of the contemporary moment. The fourth remains mindful of global, national and local economic contexts and their impact upon disabled people. Theoretical concepts, empirical findings and analytical offerings should be judged in

terms of their relevance, reach and fit with specific and more general localities. The fifth adopts a position of cultural relativism whilst seeking to say some things about the global nature of disability. The sixth keeps in mind the view that any analysis of disability should not preclude consideration of other forms of political activism. Increasingly, we are witnessing intersectional moments within new social movements and these crossovers and alliances should be attended to. The seventh element maintains a commitment to politically organise and contest disablism and ableism in the everyday lives of disabled people. Social theory should not be distanced from people's everyday realities.

Critical Disability Studies is a burgeoning field of theorising and activism that welcomes debate, discord and disagreement. But in this article we want to take a little time to grapple with some aspects of our affective politics (for explication, see Ahmed 2004, 2007/2008, 2010). That is to say, we want to sit with and respond to our emotional, visceral and embodied reactions to some contemporary developments in disability theorising in order to pose a number of further considerations that we think we should address as disability scholars and activists. We are thinking about how one is touched by new ideas and how one is left feeling after these theoretical encounters. And, in typical academic style, perhaps, we respond to this initial question (what is the purpose of theory) with yet more questions about contemporary disability theorising. After all, as we all know, unpacking disability often involves asking an increasing number of questions, to which there may be very few easily obtainable or fixed answers.

We would agree with the assertion that the purpose of Critical Disability Studies theory is 'to start with disability but never end with it: disability is *the* space from which to think through a host of political, theoretical and practical issues that are relevant to all' (Goodley 2016, 157; original emphasis). While this expansive purpose is to be celebrated we also need to acknowledge that some critics might wonder whether this decentres or sidelines disability; rendering disability but one of a number of identity positions that must be attended to. We want to keep this question alive; to consider the impact of an intersectional approach that magnifies our politics and extends our engagements. One response we have to this question is that Critical Disability Studies should place disability in the foreground of theoretical and political debates whilst, simultaneously, demonstrating disability's relationship with the politics of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and age. Such an ambition does, of course, raise questions about inclusivity. If Critical Disability Studies is to be all things to all people, might it lose its distinctive contribution – that is – to think about the world through disability? But when does specificity become exclusivity?



## Provocation 2: how inclusive is Critical Disability Studies?

Regrettably, Critical Disability Studies largely remains an interdisciplinary occupation of researchers writing in and from the Global North countries. This should come as no surprise. We are writing from the context of the United Kingdom. As Thomas (2007) alludes to, at least from the 1990s to the present day, British social modellists have referred to one another as equal authorities. Even worse, British scholars have imposed language choices coined in Britain on the rest of the world. We have witnessed occasions when British academics have attacked the people-first language choice of African researchers (who deployed the term ‘people with disabilities’) and insisted on the need for those researchers to adopt Anglocentric terminology (‘disabled people’). Is it any wonder that disability studies has been attacked for its inherent whiteness in a paper by Miles, Nishida, and Forber-Pratt (2017) in *Disability Studies Quarterly* in 2017? Also, let us not forget that Chris Bell (2006) first labelled it ‘White disability studies’ in Lennard Davis’ primary text *The Disability Studies Reader* (2nd ed.) as early as 2006. But we wonder whether there is a wider cultural imperialism at play in iterations of what we would consider to be critical and cultural disability studies? US scholarship, for example, is notorious in its US-centric choice and use of disability theory and literature. Just as many American citizens lack a passport, so numerous American disability theorists frame their writing within the borderlands of the nation-state of the United States. Whose theory is this, then? What kinds of audience do these writers have in mind? What really is the point of Anglo-American-centric disability theory when it has so little to say to anyone outside of these spaces of Empire? We too must locate much of our own work in such a dangerously narrow space. If we are to advance responsive conceptual frameworks that identify oppression and offer politicised responses (Oliver and Barnes 2012; Shakespeare 2013), it is imperative that these are in concert with the local experiences of disabled people, contesting hitherto colonial, Western European and North American versions of disability politics and advocacy, contributing to Global South Disability Studies (Jayasooria and Ooi 1994; Whyte and Ingstad 1995; Miles 2007; Groce 2000; Ghai 2006; Meekosha 2011; Grech 2011; Munsaka and Charnley 2013; Wan Arnidawati 2013; Grech 2015a, 2015b; Grech and Soldatic 2016; Soldatic and Johnson 2017; Chataika 2018). We welcome the interventions made by these writers (including indigenous and First Nations authors) and scholars from spaces outside the Global North (exemplified by the journal *Disability and the Global South*).

These new forms of Critical Disability Studies scholarship are advancing new social theories of disability that respond to, for example (drawing on the authors cited): the centrality of religion and totem; the genocidal impact of European settlers; the significance of households and informal economies;

indigenous collectivist practices such as *ubuntu/hunhu*; community and kinship networks; the specifics of agrarian, subsistence, work in kind and entrepreneurship; the impact of rapid industrialisation; the globalisation of neoliberal thinking; migration; the over-representation of disability categories in indigenous communities; and the impact of climate change, supranational disability policy and new economies based on technology and innovation. Analyses originating from and responsive to local and national contexts have a country-specific relevance and a pan-national application. Such work is fundamental; permitting us to contest the normative and universalising theories of human and societal development that dominant social sciences (particularly those written from the Global North) and, instead, working with our international colleagues to produce decolonising frameworks of understanding akin to those found in Global South spaces (Burman 2008; Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Grech and Goodley 2012).

There is an urgent need to trouble the self-referential elitism of Western European and North American scholarship. But, at the same time, we need to stay mindful too that poverty, conflict and marginalisation are not simply matters for disabled people in Global South countries (Barnes and Sheldon 2010). The recent case of the British government's failure to adhere to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – as a consequence of the savage cuts to services – acts as a sobering reminder to us all that many disabled people find themselves in dangerously precarious situations all over the world (see United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2017). Moreover, responses to this precarity can be found in the many innovative community responses of disabled people's organisations, self-advocacy groups and alliances with families and critical professionals across Global North and Global South spaces. Indeed, interdependence and distributed forms of activism – marks of the potency of disability politics – clearly must be used and galvanised in order to share good practices that work through local and global connections and networks. We want to encourage Critical Disability Studies scholars to be clear, open and honest about their own local locations (rather than assuming the reader already knows about, say, the British context) whilst also addressing the dangers of centring Critical Disability Studies in what Meekosha (2011) calls the metropole of the Global North. We need to be explicit about the places from which we write. It is therefore only fair for us to acknowledge that as UK-based researchers we are, by definition, in danger of reproducing scholarship written for and by other scholars in the Global North. To counteract this, Critical Disability Studies must remain expansive in its alliances. This should include engaging with new forms of virtual and non-virtual politics. Examples include activism coalescing around autism (for example, Arnold 2012b; Autscape 2013; Baggs 2007; Milton 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2014), the

Mad movement, Mad Studies and psychiatric survivor movements (LeFrançois, Menzies, and Reaume 2013; Castrodale 2015). Through exposing the violence of the psy-disciplines, these communities resist the reification of sanity and normalcy and expose the pathologisation and psychiatrisation of difference. How might we then theorise in culturally specific ways whilst also reaching out to a more global political commons? To what extent are our theoretical resources in tune with the particularities of distinct forms of disability politics? How might we embrace more impairment-specific kinds of activism whilst also furthering a shared disability rights agenda?

### **Provocation 3: is disability the object or subject of studies?**

One sign of a theoretical field's sophistication is the extent to which various theoretical formulations are brought to bear on the said field. There is no doubt that Critical Disability Studies has, to name but a view theoretical persuasions, built on historical materialism (Barnes 1991), invited in new materialism (Feely 2016; Flynn 2017) and posthumanism (Braidotti 2013), developed critical realism (Vehmas and Watson 2014; Danermark 2002), imparted phenomenological thinking (Hughes and Paterson 1997; Davy 2010) and witnessed concerted engagements with poststructuralism and postmodernism (Corker and French 1999; Corker and Shakespeare 2002). Disability theory has impacted on the arts and humanities (Crow 2011), the social sciences (Watson, Roulstone, and Thomas 2012), medicine and the humanities (Thomas 2007; Stoddard Holmes 2015), the psychological sciences (Marks 1999a, 1999b; Watermeyer 2013), social work (Boxall and Beresford 2013), occupational therapy (Yoshida, Li, and Odette 1999), physiotherapy (Pickering 2017), nursing and midwifery (Walsh-Gallagher 2009; Grant et al. 2010), adapted physical activity and human kinetics (Peers, Spencer-Cavaliere, and Eales 2014; Eales and Peers 2016), sports science (Smith, Bundon, and Best 2016; Williams, Smith, and Paphthomas 2018) and rehabilitation (Gibson 2016; McPherson, Gibson, and Leplege 2015). A fear we share is that just as more and more theories of disability are generated we wonder to what extent disability has become an object of curiosity for theoreticians and disciplines in ways that detract from disabled people and their allies being the driving subjects and articulators of theory.

One of the guiding philosophies of disability studies was the mantra of the Disabled People's Movement: 'Nothing about us, Without us' (Charlton 2006). This mantra was pulled into the early work of disability theory to foreground disabled people as organic intellectuals and, crucially, positing that in order to start learning about disability then one must draw on the expertise of disabled people as active subjects of intellectual endeavour. One of the consequences of the influence of Critical Disability Studies on numerous

disciplinary and practice fields is that disabled people are drawn in as interesting objects of inquiry rather than as arbiters of knowledge production. This can have, understandably, a number of negative corollaries.

Take, as an example, Puar's (2017) recent work on debility – exemplified in her text *The Right to Maim*. This has rapidly become the go-to text for many contemporary scholars in Critical Disability Studies. The text develops her work on debility: the failings of bodies to not only work themselves out of poverty but also failings of bodies to match up to the neoliberal imperative demanded by cruelly optimistic ideologies of advanced capitalism in times of austerity (see also Puar 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012). We have found Puar's work incredibly helpful in thinking through the debilitating impacts of neoliberal-ableist capitalism: taking further Berlant's (2007) equally influential work on those slow deaths caused by the market (Bates, Goodley, and Runswick-Cole 2017; Goodley 2014). Yet we worry about what becomes of disability theory. Shildrick (2015) criticises the potential of debility studies to flatten and ignore the hierarchy that exists between disabled and non-disabled people (and to this we could add the differences between poor and rich people, between white and people of colour). We agree with this observation but also offer another challenge. Puar's work is symptomatic of an approach to the study of disability that uses disability and linked phenomena such as debility as referential objects in order to advance another kind of argument and form of cultural praxis. *The Right to Maim* reads mainly as a critique of violent nation-states and the production of debility (rather than a development of the potential of disability politics). Such work is, of course, important and part of the staple diet of cultural studies theorists. But where does this leave disability as the motivating subject of analysis, politicisation and generator of emancipatory theory and practice? When disability or impairment is brought in merely as an effect of history, then how does this speak to the politics of disability? Who has the right to use disability as an object of intellectual inquiry, and why? This has led us to ask of scholars engaged with disability: why are you here?

We are not suggesting that we fall back into simplistic essentialist arguments which posit the view that only disabled people are allowed to do disability theory (O'Toole 2013). Nor are we asserting that theories of disability always have to be tied directly to the political work of disabled people and their organisations (Barnes 1996). Neither are we purporting that you have to have been in the Critical Disability Studies world for a number of years before you are magically handed the graduation certificate that gives you the divine and qualified right to finally pontificate about disability with authority. We do wonder, however, about who is doing theory and for what reasons. When disability becomes merely the object of intellectual inquiry, then there is a real danger that the politics of disability are domesticated.

This raises other questions: is disability being used for other analytical purposes? Is disability a driving subject of contemplation or a passive object to be tokenistically included? What are the dangers of disability being used as a metaphor for explaining other potentially disconnected processes? Is the potential of disability theory and activism reduced when disability only appears as yet another object of study in a curriculum?

#### **Provocation 4: what matters or gets said about disability?**

This is a question related to language and matter. Let us start with language and some of the potential pitfalls associated with unpacking discourses of disability. One of the strongest developments within Critical Disability Studies has been the cultural studies approach (Shakespeare 2013) that draws heavily on the humanities and arts and contextualises disability in relation to dominant and anti-hegemonic forms of cultural reproduction (Garland Thomson 2011; Davis 2013). While disability has tended to be conceptualised in terms of lack, disability's ubiquity throughout all forms of culture from painting to film and music indicates that disability serves some important cultural practices. This led Mitchell and Snyder (2000) to frame disability in terms of narrative prosthesis: disability is used as a cultural prop on which to lean. Disability is used to convey failure and deviance. Disability is endlessly evoked in order to reproduce those discourses that sit in contrast to normative, non-disabled society (Garland Thomson 2011). Pitching disability at the very centre of cultural and discursive critique has been incredibly important. Not only have Critical Disability Studies scholars foregrounded concerns of disabled artists and activists, but disability has entered mainstream cultural criticism and theoretical regeneration. One is now more likely to encounter disability in, for example, poststructuralist criticism just as one is likely to engage with race, sexuality and gender. However, following Titchkosky (2015), there are inevitable dangers if and when disability is reduced to metaphor; a metaphor in which disability discourse is only drawn upon to denote lack, deficit, fear and malfunction:

We are handicapped by a lack of knowledge.

Crippled with anxiety.

Blind to the truth.

We all know these problems of everyday disablist language. We acknowledge that critical disability scholars are also always unconsciously/consciously complicit in their reproduction. Check out the Twitter hashtag #everydayableism for some contemporary daily examples. But we want to think about the effects of disability metaphors when they are mainly used to conceptualise oppression. First, disability discourse offers metaphors for

explaining non-disabled people's human troubles, although disabled people's marginalisation continues to enter the cultural imaginaries of our everyday lives. Disabled people are left out of the very discussions of discrimination that rely so heavily on disabling metaphors. What a particularly cruel irony. Second, disability discourse – especially disability as marginal – has little to give to the view that disability might be desired. To desire disability is to fit with what we understand as crip theory's greatest gift: that disability has the potential to disrupt, destabilise and shake up the normative foundations of culture and society (McRuer 2006). What other language, words, symbols, signs and artefacts might disability theory give us that take us beyond disability as lack? Re-finding the potential of disability is incredibly difficult in contemporaneous times when dominant modes of cultural and discursive reproduction continue to portray and constitute disabled people as the objects of pity, charity and professional intervention and leeches on the ever-receding systems of welfare, health and social care. The everyday language of disability continues to debase disabled people.

Let us turn to our second concern: the matter of disability. It is safe to say that the question of materiality has always troubled disability theorists and these questions have been further heightened in recent iterations of Critical Disability Studies theory. The interventions of critical realists (for example, Shakespeare 2013; Vehmas and Watson 2014) have raised some important questions about the reality of impairment. Here we agree with Bill Hughes (2014), who categorises critical realist theorists as part of the more general community of Critical Disability Studies. Shakespeare (2013), for example, argues that Critical Disability Studies scholars (especially) of a cultural studies persuasion have reduced impairment merely to a discursive term; thus failing to acknowledge the material physiological and psychological realities of an impaired body and mind. However, we would assert that increasingly the body, mind and impairment have become central concerns for Critical Disability Studies, not least through the contributions of new materialist theories. Two examples from this very journal epitomise a fresh approach towards materiality and herald a new generation of critical disability theorists (Feely 2016; Flynn 2017). Flynn (2017, 156) outlines an approach to Critical Disability Studies theory that, she argues, is capable of generating 'insights into economic phenomena that do offer some material application'. She argues that to understand the material constitution of impairment, for example, is not simply a metaphorical exercise but part of a wider political movement to challenge the ways in which disability is constantly used by governments and policy-makers to justify the redistribution of – cuts to – welfare and services. Feely (2016) extols the virtues of new materialist theories to understand the complexities of disability, combining 'the advantages of older poststructuralist theories (the ability to contest oppressive identity

categories) with a thorough engagement with material reality and material embodiment' (Feely 2016, 880). A common assumption held by materialist philosophers is the notion that matter is something that exists beyond human perception (Flynn 2017). How bodies become materialised – made active, lived, felt, thought and enacted – takes place through complex associations between material/discursive, embodied/cultural, human/in-human, fleshy/technological and individual/societal entities. Following Fox and Alldred (2015), new materialism engages with social production rather than social construction; especially in relational networks or assemblages of animate and inanimate entities. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Fox and Alldred (2015, 400) conceptualise materiality as open, complex, plural, contingent and uneven. They expand further:

- Bodies are always relational as are other material, social and abstract entities with no distinct ontological status other than produced through their relationships or assemblages.
- We replace the idea of human agency with the Spinozist notion of affect: meaning simply the capacity to affect or be affected. So affects are always becoming and this refers to a change in the capacities of state of an entity.
- We attend to the production of assemblages, which are constantly becoming as they territorialise (stabilising an assemblage) or de-territorialise (destabilising an assemblage). (Fox and Alldred 2015, 401)

Clearly disability matters. And disability matters through these complex inter-penetrations of social, cultural and material lives. In this sense, then, borrowing from another writer associated with new materialism (Braidotti 2005, 2006, 2013), the materiality of contemporary life is a complex amalgam of assemblages. We are, in short, living in posthuman times (Braidotti 2013). These times are associated with a nature–nurture continuum that defies binary thinking, where material and discursive conditions of contemporary ways of life (bio, social, technological, algorithmic, computational, human, inhuman, geopolitical) are complexly interconnected (Braidotti and Hlavajova 2018, 2). It is now impossible to separate material and discursive properties because they have become so tangled up and interwoven with one another. The posthuman condition is such that the classic humanist conceptions of 'man' as the sovereign, autonomous, bounded and atomistic idealisation of modernity has given way to the posthuman, which is more extended, decentred and potentially a less anthropocentric phenomenon (Braidotti 2018). Posthuman critical thinkers 'are bonded by the compassionate acknowledgement of their interdependence, with multiple, human and non-human, others' (Braidotti, 2018, 342). Posthuman theories are enjoying a theoretical

currency within Critical Disability Studies (Reeve 2012; Gati 2014; Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole 2014a, 2014b; Apostolidou and Sturm 2016; Trigt, vanSchippers, and Kool 2016; Vandekinderen and Roets 2016; Winance 2016; Goodley et al. 2018). We welcome these interventions not least because they offer accounts of the complex constitution of entities such as impairment that do not lapse into discursive nor biological essentialism (Billington 2017). Our concern is when they are dismissed as being overly complex (a consideration discussed by Galis 2011) and deemed, unfairly in our view, not to be in tune with the lived, embodied realities of impairment (Shakespeare 2013). In contrast, a turn to materialism – new or otherwise – should not become a vehicle for smuggling in unproblematic conceptions of impairment. Instead, impairment should be considered as a complex phenomenon of our posthuman times. How can we simultaneously appropriate discourse and matter in ways that capture the material and immaterial realities of disability? What are the possible consequences of such articulations for a wider politics of disability? How might Critical Disability Studies theorisations work in ways that blend material and discursive aspects of social life? How can we trouble the traditional either/or binarisation of impairment and society?

### **Provocation 5: how can we attend to disability and ability?**

Ability is the elephant in the room whenever we evoke the sign of disability. But what do we know and think of ability? The work of Wolbring (for example, Wolbring 2009) and Campbell (for example, Campbell 2009) has been central to the development of what Goodley (2016) defines as critical studies of ableism. This scholarship and activism, while attending to the desires and ambitions of disability politics, urges us to unpack the dominant cultural imaginaries and socio-political conditions that uphold ability as the central marker of successful human accomplishment and progression. Pick any social space and one will find ability. It lurks behind any consideration of disability. Ability feeds institutions such as schools, colleges and workplaces as the most valued of human capacities. Ability is demanded by our post-welfare societies as states draw back, the market moves in and individual consumers/labourers take on the self-contained responsibilities expected of the new global citizens (Mladenov 2015). Our times of neoliberal ableism clearly value cleverness, mobility, flexibility, achievement, emancipation and success (Goodley 2014). While some might celebrate the queer and crip art of failure, many desire being or becoming able (Mitchell and Snyder 2015). Critical studies of ableism balk at individualistic, psychological or neoliberal definitions of ability while Critical Disability Studies cherishes notions of interdependence, distributed competence, assemblages of possibility and



human potentialities. The early writers in disability studies were right to consider social theories of disability but we think we now need to also develop new social theories of ability: in order to consider what ambitions we have for one another and how we are framing these ambitions (Campbell 2009). Failure, of course, can throw a disruptive spanner into the capitalist machine's obsessions with autonomy, independence and self-actualisation (McRuer 2006; Mitchell, Snyder, and Ware 2014). But many people in poverty (and many others) very much desire these attributes of ability.

We believe that Critical Disability Studies scholars need to expand more on the significance of dis/ability. In a recent piece, Goodley (2018a) unpacked the dis/ability concept through reference to theorisations that have occurred over the last three decades. Dis/ability is a split term – and a term split for a reason – to consider the ways in which disability/ability are always reliant upon one another (an obvious point), and in order to think of disability we must pull into the foreground the entity that is ability (a less well developed idea). To know something about disability one needs to have a sense of its often hidden referent (ability). Disabled people are known in relation to able-bodied/minded people, although the latter group is rarely named but assumed (already) to exist (as a naturalised group of society). Disability becomes known as a malfunction of ability (either as lack or excess). Liddiard (2018) demonstrates the ways in which the sexualities and sexual practices of disabled people are rarely conceptualised simply as just being present. In contrast, disabled sexualities are either deficient (e.g. an impairment prevents a disabled person from 'achieving' orgasm or giving pleasure to another person) or excessive (e.g. sexually inappropriate behaviours associated with specific impairment categories). The binarised, split and bifurcated phenomenon of the dis/ability complex repels disability and ability from one another. Ability and disability roll in associated human and non-human qualities to further expand upon their qualities.

We suggest that Critical Disability Studies engage with the relative relevance, purpose, focus and alliance of a number of significant theoretical interventions with an overriding aim in mind: to simultaneously theorise and contest the conditions of disablism (the exclusion of people with sensory, physical and cognitive impairments) and ableism (the exclusion of many people by a cultural imaginary associated with self-sufficiency, autonomy and independence). Thinking about these two processes together engages us with what we might term the dis/ability complex: a phenomenon that acknowledges the mutually inclusive socio-political practices associated with the conceptual co-constitution of disability and ability (Goodley 2018a). While Critical Disability Studies started with separate studies of disability and ability, it has clearly reached a stage of theoretical maturity in which dis/ability marks a simultaneous and dual process of interrogating disability/ability;

**Table 1.** The dis/ability complex.

Disability	Ability
Emotional	Rational
Mad	Sane
Dependent	Autonomous
Intermeshed	Atomistic
Sitting	Standing
Collective packs	Lone wolves
Crippling	Norming
Entangled	Alone
Many others	The same
Environment	Man
Nature	Civilisation
Non-human	Human
Animal	Anthropos
Cosmology	Science
Sustainability	Growth
Bodies	Minds

Note: Adapted from Goodley (2018a, 17).

disablism/ableism. At its most exaggerated, then, the dis/ability complex presents a stark contrast between opposing poles, as Table 1 demonstrates.

This representation seeks to capture the dominant cultural imaginaries of disability and ability and to consider how they are constituted in relation to one another; often as distinct polarised entities. At the same time, Table 1 seeks to pull out more affirmative qualities associated with each. Hence, while medical and individual models emphasise the embodied, lacking, emotional and irrational nature of disability (a nature that is always socially contained), dependency and collectivity are qualities of the disability experience that Critical Disability Studies have pulled out as positive associations and possibilities. In contrast, ableist ideologies associated with autonomy promote atomistic, solitary forms of personhood that threaten to individualise personhood (Campbell 2009). But this raises a further question; what might we want to keep of ability?

In reality, of course, most of us live in the midst of this complex – in the liminal space between the polarised contrasts (see Titchkosky 2015) – in what we might term an in-between-al politics of disability (Goodley 2018b). This means that we occupy landscapes in which disablism is generated and ableism is upheld. When one thinks of the institutions of family, work and education then we can readily identify dis/ability at play. Schools are built upon highly regulated principles and policy discourses of individual achievement and progression. They are inherently individualistic and reward the entrepreneurial achievements of self-governing learners. The school is a literal and metaphorical ableist playground. At the very same time, educational institutions create disability and impairment categories. Disability is more present than absent. Para-professionals of education – including educational psychologists, social workers, behaviour managers, police and psychiatrists – are called upon to address disability. But disability is not simply something

that is objectified or pathologised via the psy-methods of education. Disability also offers an opportunity. Disabled children have the potential to shake up pedagogy, re-think classroom organisation, re-design playgrounds and re-engage parents with school leadership. Disability appears as an affirmative phenomenon: a chance to pause, re-jig and reorient education. Similarly, ability has been reappropriated by disabled people, amongst others, in order to demonstrate capacity, potentiality and possibility. The global self-advocacy movement's choice of 'People First' as a common moniker for groups and the 'Not Dead Yet' slogan of the North American disability movement are two attempts to reclaim normative language<sup>1</sup>. Also, in the Critical Disability Studies literature, we have witnessed attempts to offer more distributed, collectivist and ensembled forms of human capacity including distributed competence of parenting skills of people with learning disabilities and their networks (Booth and Booth 1994, 1998); interdependence as a mode of living that is far more desirable than independence (Reindall 1999); flows of connections across students in school as a means of promoting inclusive education (Allan and Youdell 2017); and material assemblages between humans, other humans and non-humans including machines and animals (Feely 2016; Flynn 2017). These contributions reposition ability away from the usual individualised footings (disabling pun intended). That said, reclaiming a humanist normative understanding of human capacity still holds water; witnessed by the potency of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons across the globe. The dis/ability complex acknowledges the work done by disabled people and their allies either side of the '/' (and in the in-between) (Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole 2014a, 2014b). Disability is a place of oppression but also possibility. Ability is a phenomenon that might be reworked to reveal its collective potential as opposed to its usual individualising and limited configurations. We would want to ask: what do you want to keep of ability; how might we frame ability in non-ableist ways; how might Critical Disability Studies re-think the phenomenon of ability; and, in rearticulating ability, what would such work do to a-priori conceptualisations of disability?

## Conclusions

One of the early leitmotifs of emerging Critical Disability Studies scholarship was an attitude of tolerance to divergent viewpoints and clashing perspectives. As Critical Disability Studies grows in maturity and distinct communities of practice and theoretical persuasions are adopted, we need to remain mindful not to reproduce schisms, orthodoxies and prejudice. We should pose questions about the purpose and inclusivity of disability theory. We remain attentive to considerations of disability, matter and discourse as

more intersectional analyses are preferred. We should encourage scholars and researchers to consider the interplay of disability and ability to contemplate the meaning of disability.

Theoretical debate will always prompt debate and discord. Those that deliberate, ponder or research disability do so not from an objective nor disengaged positionality. Many come to Critical Disability Studies because of wider personal and political entanglements with matters of social justice. Watermeyer (2012, 9) counsels that intellectual deliberations should take place in a climate marked by a 'generosity of engagement'. We agree with this but we also want to encourage deeper reflections on what lies behind theorising. This raises questions about intent, affiliation and ambition. When theory works well it has the power to capture inequality and articulate hope. The appearance of Critical Disability Studies scholarship should not be viewed as a rejection of disability studies theory that went before.

The arrival of Critical Disability Studies is testimony to the maturity of a field that has built upon foundational knowledge and recognises that complex socio-political times require an apposite response. The politics of disability are intertwined with many other politics including those associated with racism, sexism, transphobia, occidentalism, colonialism, classism, developmentalism and heterosexism. Critical Disability Studies should seek to be in tune with these complexities but this does not mean this community will always get things right. Since the beginnings of social, cultural and economic models of disability in the early 1990s, the political landscape has changed in many ways. Crucially, disability theoreticians and activists have drawn attention to the missing parts of disability knowledge. This has included, to name but a few, calls to engage with the politics of incarceration (Ben-Moshe, Chapman, and Carey 2014), indigenous and First Nations people (Durst, South, and Bluehardt 2006; Hollinsworth 2013), trans-activism (Mog and Lock-Swarr 2008; Slater and Liddiard 2018), trans-globalisation (Erevelles 2012), environmentalist and green movements (Fenney Salkeld 2016), rurality (Soldatic and Johnson 2017), animal rights (Taylor 2011, 2017) and transhumanism (Hall 2016). There is still much to do. It is therefore imperative to roll back from our knowledge production to probe further the assumptions on which we draw and the possible consequences of what we propose. We hope that this article is a small contribution to this reflexive and critical project.

## Note

1. It is important to note here that such language is hugely problematic for disabled people with life-limiting and life-threatening impairments; a group of disabled people with whom we are currently engaging in the Economic and Social Research Council-funded project 'Life, Death, Disability and the Human: Living Life to the Fullest' (ES/P001041/1).

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## ORCID

Dan Goodley  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0660-5671>

Katherine Runswick-Cole  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9658-9718>

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