

Disabling Environments: Global Bodies and Environmental Accessibility

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Overview

My dissertation will explore representations of disability and disabling ecologies in postcolonial fiction, poetry, drama, and film. I will examine how my chosen texts inform cultural understandings of the interaction between disability and ecological risk in order to investigate the intersections and tensions amongst the fields of disability studies, postcolonial studies, and ecocritical studies. My main research aim is to consider the representational strategies of narratives that transform an idea of disability as a risk to be feared into an investigation of the risks that people with disabilities face. The central questions of my project include: How can we critique unsustainable practices while resisting the tendency to point toward disabled bodies as the undesirable outcomes of social injustice or environmental degradation? How can we celebrate disability without justifying the disproportionate experiences of painful disability throughout the globe? How do creative works suggest possibilities for celebrating human variation while maintaining a critique of disabling global politics?

As disability studies has turned its attention to global locations of disability, many critics have responded by noting the difficulties of transporting theories developed in the West to the Global South and to experiences of mass disablement (Barker; Barker and Murray; Davidson; Sherry). For example, while significant work in disability studies interrogates the binary between disability and normalcy, in many global contexts, having a disability may be understood as a normal state; citizens with disabilities may constitute the majority of the population in some areas (Barker; Barker and Murray; Carrigan). Although early studies of disability representation in literature tend to focus on western texts, many critics have begun to examine the materiality of

disability in postcolonial texts by questioning or expanding upon metaphorical readings of disability. Other scholars explore the significance of the interplay between metaphor and materiality in these texts (Barker). Disability studies scholar Robert McRuer turns his attention to the question of global bodies in the concluding chapter of *Crip Theory*. Addressing the perception that disability signifies suffering and that disabled bodies are closer to death, McRuer expresses concern that the common approbation that everyone who lives long enough will become disabled invokes fear as opposed to identification. He asks what it would mean to “welcome the disability to come, to desire it?” (207). Conscious of the difficulties that this question presents in an era of advanced capitalism, in which global bodies can refer to corporations that function as legally autonomous agents, McRuer asks, “in such terrible times, is it even possible to ask the question this way?” (207).

McRuer's questions are consistent with a model of disability influenced by poststructuralist theory. Disability studies positions itself against a medical model in which disability is a deficit rooted in an individual person (Davis; Garland-Thomson). A significant body of research in disability studies works within the social model that distinguishes between disability and impairment. The social model recognizes that disability is a social and political experience, and emphasizes the disabling impact of built environments and attitudes (Pfeiffer). Other scholars, however, critique the social model for its strict distinction between disability and impairment and suggest how other modes of understanding disability might open up the generative possibilities of bodily difference. For example, Shelley Tremain, exposing the realist ontology that informs our understanding of impairment, argues that our definitions of impairment are not transhistorical or objective (34). The social model, informed by identity politics, creates a distinction between disability and impairment that is similar to the distinction that feminists created between gender and sex (Shakespeare and Corker 3). Iris Marion Young explains that “while the social model of disability destabilizes the assumption that the ‘problem’ with some people has to do with the attributes of their bodies and functions, it nevertheless continues to presume a certain fixity to these bodies...” (xiii).

My own work follows in the tradition of applying the insights of poststructuralism to disability theory, but I concentrate on the ways that the natural environment, in addition to the built environment, contributes to our understanding of bodily difference. Considering the ecological contexts of disabling pain, I add the following questions to McRuer’s list: What might

it mean to “welcome the disability to come,” even as we recognize that our unsustainable practices are creating disabling environments? What kinds of narrative strategies allow writers and artists to engage the material difficulties of living in a globalized world without problematically positioning disabled bodies as inferior bodies, or as signs of social and environmental degradation? The first section of my dissertation addresses these questions by examining representations of illness and disability related to industrial development and disaster, with a particular focus on the experiences of the Dene community in Northern Canada and the citizens of Bhopal, India. My second section examines the interplay between environmental activism and autistic self-advocacy in response to the controversial concept of a global autism epidemic.

Outline

1. Introduction

In my introduction, I will discuss the development of disability studies in the humanities with a focus on literary criticism. After reviewing the ways that scholars, including Michael Bérubé, Lennard Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, David Mitchell, and Sharon Snyder, address the relationship between disability and narrative, I will consider the impact that disability studies has made within the field of postcolonial studies, and in turn, the impact that postcolonial studies has had upon disability studies. To this end, I will discuss the insights of Clare Barker, Michael Davidson, Nirmala Everelles, Stuart Murray, and Ato Quayson. I will then turn my attention to the emergence of connections between disability studies and environmental criticism, including the work of Stacy Alaimo and Sarah Jaquette Ray. Finally, I turn to ecocritical approaches to postcolonial texts, including the work of Anthony Carrigan, Rob Nixon, and Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee and the ways that these critics, directly and indirectly, speak to the relationship between disability and environmental risk in neocolonial contexts.

1. Staging Slow Violence: Disabling Illness in Burning Vision

This chapter concerns Marie Clements’s play *Burning Vision*, which juxtaposes the bombing of Hiroshima with the ‘slow violence’ inflicted upon Dene ore carriers and miners in the Northwest Territories who developed cancers from handling uranium ore. Nixon defines

slow violence as “a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is not typically viewed as violence at all” (2). He argues that addressing the near invisibility of slow violence, which disproportionately affects the world's poorest populations, requires new representational strategies that make collective amnesia and environmental racism more visible (2). In a review of Nixon's work, Dayna Nadine Scott argues that his descriptions of communities in the Global South map onto descriptions of indigenous activists in the Global North (482). I consider Scott's insights as I ask how postcolonial writers in Canada employ strategies for making slow violence visible. I argue that *Burning Vision's* expansive scope and dramatic irony make visible the collective amnesia that characterizes relationships toward Canada's marginalized populations.

I examine the relationship between illness and place in the play using Stacy Alaimo's ‘transcorporeality’, a concept that “underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment” (2). Alaimo's work speaks to Nixon's concerns, but she also illustrates how understanding disability as violence against the body can reinforce stigma. With respect to a model of disability that values deviation, Alaimo cautions that many people who are sensitive to chemicals would insist, “not all deviations in this world of toxicants and xenobiotic chemicals should be embraced” (139). An openness to deviation thus involves “tak[ing] the onto-epistemological condition of chemically reactive people seriously by making the world more accessible for them,” (139). Along with using Alaimo and Nixon's work to read Clements's play, however, I want to consider how *Burning Vision* offers new questions with regards to slow violence and transcorporeality, and their potential for guiding a transformation from the ethics of apology to the practice of access.

2. Industrial Toxicity: *Animal's People* and Environmental Access

My second chapter examines disability and industrial development by turning to Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People*, and its fictional representation of the Bhopal Disaster. I use the novel to explore the tension between a model of disability that celebrates variation, and painful experiences of bodily difference. Sinha's protagonist, Animal, walks on his hands and feet because chemical poisoning has affected his spinal growth. Nixon reads Animal as a metaphor for India, arguing that his posture “embodies a crushing, neoliberal, transnational economic relationship and also marks him as a literal ‘lowlife’, a social and anatomical other whose physical form externalizes the unhurried metastases coursing through the community” (56). One

of the tensions between disability studies and postcolonial studies stems from the difference between reading disability as symbolic of the postcolonial nation versus reading disability as a material experience (Barker and Murray 219). I do not wish to contest Nixon's reading, or to suggest that metaphorical readings are necessarily incompatible with disability studies readings; rather, I wish to explore the significance of Animal's rejection of how journalists, doctors, and imagined readers interpret his body.

I argue that although we can read Animal as symbolic, his story also insists that we recognize how ideologies shape our understandings of disability. As Barker argues, representations of global trauma depend upon the docile body of the child to "emphasiz[e] its susceptibility to disablement in order to heighten the sense of humanitarian crisis and to insist on the urgency of western intervention..." (11). While Sinha's novel does show how people living in areas of mass disablement *do* experience pain, it also critiques the use of Animal's body to create a narrative of suffering in which his life can *only* signify injustice. Animal's acceptance of his body, however, does not signify acceptance of the situation in Khaufpur. The novel is critical of exported solutions, shifting its focus away from Animal's corporeality and toward neo-colonial corporate practices.

3. Disabling Discourse: Autism and Environmentalism

In this chapter, I turn from Animal's experience as an 'anatomical other' to a discussion of ecological othering and autism (Nixon 56). Stuart Murray, who argues that many people have understood autism as a condition hosted by individuals, describes the impact that this "autism-inside-the-person" model has had upon approaches to awareness and treatment (*Representing Autism* 30). Many theories, like the belief that autism is a form of mercury poisoning, foster the idea that autism can be cured when "all serious research into autism acknowledges that it is a lifelong condition that is built into the fabric of the person who has it" and "as such, it cannot be cured" (*Autism* 89-90). Many activists and academics challenge the belief that a cure is desirable (Baggs; Broderick and Ne'eman; Heilker; Sinclair; Yergeau). Yet despite growing acceptance of neurological difference, many organizations continue to suggest that rising diagnoses constitute a health crisis, when one could also frame the crisis as one of services and attitudes. Ari Ne'eman and Alicia Broderick argue that positioning autism as a health crisis "draws upon a medicalized discourse in which people who have labels of autism are constituted not as neurologically different, nor even as disabled, but rather as diseased, not healthy, or as ill" (468).

This chapter examines how autism is often understood as resulting from unsustainable practices. In part, this is a way of furthering Alaimo's discussion of an openness to deviation by considering how to pursue disability acceptance alongside environmental advocacy. I use Ray's formulation of the 'ecological other' to examine the discourse surrounding an autism epidemic. Ray explains that mainstream environmentalism contributes to exclusion, arguing that, "the figure of the disabled body is the quintessential symbol of humanity's alienation from nature" (6). Her concept is useful for considering how the language of risk surrounding autism is bolstered by a belief that it results from the unnatural effects of our diet and products developed by multinational corporations. I do not engage with the scientific question of autism causation; rather, I focus on the communication of research linking autism and the environment by investigating the narrative strategies and rhetorical devices used in newspaper articles, blogs from autism communities, and materials from autism organizations. This chapter develops my application of theory in the first two chapters, and provides context for my fourth chapter, which focuses on the cultural production of advocates who respond to this othering. I consider how metaphors linking ecological devastation to the changing condition of neurology are problematic, as the interpretation of hypotheses that there are links between environmental toxins and autism tend to be expressed using language that evokes fear. I argue that ecological othering occurs when autism is held up as an example of the toxicity of our society, and I suggest the importance of pursuing efforts to link disability rights and environmental justice in a nuanced way.

4. Ecological Others in Poetry, Essays, and Film

My fourth chapter examines the artistic production of advocates who challenge the idea that autism is unnatural. These advocates draw on the paradigm of neurodiversity, which Ne'eman describes as, "the idea that the paradigm of acceptance extended towards racial, religious, and other similar differences should apply to neurology as well" (Qtd. in Broderick and Ne'eman). I discuss the video performance "In My Language" by Amanda Baggs, Tito Mukhopadhyay's poetry, and the documentary film *Wretches and Jabberers*. These works reframe the struggles associated with autism, suggesting that we prioritize acceptance over medical cures or behavioural interventions. While the writers that I discuss challenge assumptions that autistic people are incapable of representing themselves through language, often by employing literary and rhetorical devices that they have been deemed incapable of using, they also complicate associations between language and empathy. As a result of the

popularity of Simon Baron-Cohen's concept of mindblindness, the idea that autistic individuals lack a theory of mind, autistic individuals have been denied the ability to empathize, an ability that has been strongly linked to writing literature. Erin Manning explains that language is a "double-edged sword" for advocates who want to deemphasize language, but also understand that language has been held up as central to inclusion (163). I suggest that connections between literature and empathy can also be understood by looking to how postcolonial critic Srinivas Aravamudan problematizes how literary critics fetishize literature "as the sign of humanity..." (270). I use Aravamudan's theory to consider the generative possibilities of communication that has been labeled defective.

In concluding, I emphasize how my texts respond to the ways that disability appears within discourse as a risk to be feared. These texts question both the stigma associated with disability, and the collective amnesia that renders the lives of people with disabilities precarious. I argue that these texts show how bridging environmentalism and disability rights does not necessitate a reintroduction of the medical model, but instead suggests the need for deeper investigations into the risks that individuals with disabilities face in contexts specific to place.

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