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Fictions of Corporeal Diversity – Symposium Report

In 'A Path on the Periphery: The Way of Literary Disability Studies', David Bolt reviewed some of the pioneering works in the field and set about creating awareness of a tripartite model for literary disability studies. In his thought provoking keynote he described a new way to consider representations of mental and physical difference, to move beyond approaches traditionally informed by normative positivisms or non-normative negativisms. Taking Brian Friel's play *Molly Sweeney* as a specific example, he demonstrated how the issues the text raises about blindness are often ignored or reduced to metaphor, which, in turn serves to efface broader social and cultural issues connected to the lived reality of disability. Significantly, Bolt argued for a third approach. Considering the possibilities of exploring this text in terms of non-normative positivisms, Bolt asserted that the representation of disability, rather than being ignored or considered in a superficial way, could be engaged with productively. 'This does not come down to tolerance and inclusion', he argued, 'but radical inclusion and profound appreciation.' He went on to outline the important implications these ideas have in terms of curricula and the way texts are taught to students of all ages. Engaging with these issues, he explained, can highlight the fact that disability connects us. 'If we live long enough, at some point we will all be disabled.'

Right from the outset this was a day of connections, expected and otherwise. The first panel memorably touched on two famous literary wrestling matches (Genesis 32 and the opening scene of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* respectively) and wrestled in turn with early attitudes to disabled bodies both as sites to confirm heavenly ownership and as material challenges to the idea of transcendence. Kaye McLelland's paper 'Wrestling the Angel: Visions of the Disabled Body in Early Modern Sermons', explored the way disability in post-reformation England was closely connected to punishment and sin. In examining contemporary sermonizers' accounts of Jacob wrestling the angel and their tendency to describe him as 'halting to his grave' (in an interesting revision of the original Biblical account which does not indicate a permanent disability), Mclelland asked questions about the way disability was regarded at the time. Was it in fact seen as a sign of reprobation, a punishment from God, or a symbol of his ownership? And is the sermonizers' revision of the story an indication that they were searching for an identity category that didn't yet exist?

In 'Recognising Shakespearean Disability', Susan Anderson stated her aims both to bring Early Modern and Disability Studies together, and to uncover the invisible norms that disability covers up. Rather than focus on references to disability in Shakespeare, Anderson looked instead at what disability qualifies by its absence. This led to a discussion of the hegemony of individualism, particularly the persistent myth of the lone genius – an ableist concept erasing the idea of interdependence, the necessity of society and the need for collaboration. The battles of wit encountered in so many of Shakespeare's plays, Anderson argued, are dependent on the fool who offers contrast, the construction of dependence as a kind of disability. Finally, since Shakespeare's name has erased the need to focus on the man, it is easy to forget that as well as considering the texts, it is also important to take account of the real bodies used to perform them.

The second panel of the day brought together three papers exploring the representation of disability in genre fiction. In 'Broken Heroes & Sundered Gods: Examining Monstrous Protagonists in Heroic Fantasy', Chuckie Patel spoke about the narrative necessity for a 'broken hero' and the emerging trend for heroes who are physically damaged. The physical difference, she argued, is often a manifestation of spiritual trauma, and their fractured bodies operate as a kind of portal for the divine. As the hero's body moves between broken and whole, it is reformed, but it does not simply return to a normative state, it becomes something more.

Gul Dag's paper 'The Militant Cyborg: Corporeal Re/Degeneration in Neuromancer', approached William Gibson's classic cyberpunk text through a disability studies lens. Dag examined the way Gibson portrays the technical revision of a disabled body and the idea that disability is a problem to be solved. In the text, she argued, this process has overwhelmingly negative consequences and prompts questions about the ethics of cyber-technology and genetics. 'How can we assert autonomy over our own bodies,' Dag asked, 'if we do not have input into the way technology is owned and implemented?'

In her paper 'From Stereotype to Personhood: Autism and the Human Machine in Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*', Sue Smith discussed the way aspects of autism are extrapolated to highlight other issues. She argued that the cyborg in the novel embodies 'the extreme masculine' and a kind of social deficit. This means that the book relies on disability to make points about feminism and patriarchy. Furthermore, although cyborgs disrupt ideas of human/inhuman and raise questions about our reliance on technology, in this book at least, a preference for organic humanism ultimately prevails.

American literary representations of intellectual disability were the focus of the fourth panel of the day, including a discussion of authorial intent (how relevant it is) and interesting observations about the way gender plays into representation. Dawn Stobbard began with a paper entitled 'M-O-O-N – That Spells Coffey. Like the Drink Only Not Spelled the Same: Intellectual Disability in the Fiction of Stephen King'. Examining *The Green Mile* and *The Stand*, Stobbard argued that for Coffey and Cullin (the respective protagonists), childlike innocence is a fundamental part of identity. King portrays these characters as having inherent goodness and a heightened perceptiveness because of their intellectual disability. Although this is in some ways a positive representation, highlighting the need for acceptance and good treatment, it can also be seen as simplistic and a reinforcement of persistent stereotypes.

There were some significant connections between Jude Riley and Ella Houston's papers, not only in the consideration of the *Sound and the Fury*, but also the intersection of early-mid twentieth century American fiction and the development of the eugenics programme. Riley's paper '"In the Face of Idiots Every System of Philosophy and Religion Goes Down": Religion, Eugenics and Intellectual Disability in Southern Modernism' focused on short stories by Eudora Welty and Katherine Ann Porter to examine ambiguous and challenging depictions of intellectually disabled characters. These representations, he argued, critique the role of religion and community in institutionalization, and, in Welty's story 'Lilydor and the three Ladies', the rare depiction of a female character with intellectual disability raises questions about the way outcomes can be driven by morality and the fear of latent sexuality. Riley argued that authors borrowed from the eugenics discourse, but that in these examples (and others) characters often resist straightforward categorisation.

Ella Houston's examination of three classic texts: *Of Mice and Men*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Sound and the Fury*, pointed to negative representations of disability from an ableist perspective and the power of language in shaping reality. In 'Engaging with Mid-Twentieth-Century American Literary Classics Through a Disability Studies Lens', Houston connected the texts to a background of eugenics and discussed the negative impact of labels and how they intersect with identity and quality of life.

The packed day continued with a panel on Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century British literature, opening with Nour Dakkak's paper 'Rickie's Uneven Walk and the Quest of Reality in E. M. Forster's *The Longest Journey*. Dakkak argued that as a 'lame' character, Rickie's experience of walking is significant. This does not have to be reduced to metaphor, but can be considered as a physical act and way of seeing the world. She highlighted the way Rickie is often compared to others in the text. Walking, for him, is a way of keeping up with others and he continually struggles to find his own pace. His journey suggests that how we move through the world changes how we experience it and the text invites new ways of considering bodily difference in early twentieth century literature.

In her paper 'Poor Things: Parodying Diagnosis in Contemporary Literature', Hannah Tweed identified a sustained interest in cognitive difference in contemporary fiction with a turn towards medicalization and diagnosis. Tweed highlighted the way Alasdair Gray's novel parodies this turn, using postmodern techniques and drawing on existing discourses to show how far people can be encouraged and forced to perform diagnoses that are sometimes spurious and often limiting.

Following this, Pauline Eyre's paper 'Representing Reluctance: David Lodge Does Disability' explored the way biography is often valued more highly than fiction in terms of representing disability. Using Lodge's novel *Deaf Sentence*, Eyre examined the way an extrinsic author has greater freedom not only to represent the phenomenology of disability, but also to move beyond the experience, see different perspectives and confront awkward questions. In highlighting the fact that Lodge would have been unwilling to represent deafness had he not experienced the condition himself, Eyre explored the question of representation and who has the right to comment on disability.

Ideas about the autobiographical approach also informed the final panel of the day: Global Literary Disability Studies. In 'Rediscovering the Autobiographical: Reading a New German Literature on Illness and Dying', Nina Schmidt used a disability studies lens to describe a contemporary boom period for illness narratives in Germany, and their contested reception. Schmidt sought to challenge the traditionally Anglophone focus of disability studies and highlight German illness narratives which, she argued, do not treat disability as a metaphor but approach it in bodily, political and social dimensions. The critical reception for these texts is characterised by distaste, accusations of sensationalism and attempts to re-market texts as tales of healing and recovery. As Schmidt asserts, these reactions expose unhealthy exclusionary practices, a culture where medical professionals are more valued than patients and the desire to avoid uncomfortable truths.

The final paper of the day widened the geographical and cultural scope of disability studies still further. In '"Crazy and Worse Beside", Gender and Madness in Charlotte Bronte, Jean Rhys, and Vivienne Cleven', Justine Seran built a layered argument about postcolonial representations and the manipulation of the discourse of madness to silence Black and female voices. Seran discussed the way the fragmentation of the female psyche is informed by the way women have to reconcile what they are with what they are supposed to be. This was relevant in all texts and the idea of the double in *Jane Eyre* was traced right through to the representation of Bertha/Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and finally Cleven's novels which show aboriginal women to be doubly wounded storytellers.

Fictions of Corporeal Diversity was not only a day of dialogue and critical engagement, but also an important forum for a field of scholastic enquiry that is still emerging. As David Bolt asserted, the representation of mental and physical difference remains a largely neglected aspect of literary scholarship. Opportunities like this – to engage with current Literary Disability Studies research in a rich and focused way – are essential to allow us to be challenged, make connections and share new ways of thinking.