

Afterword: The Mayagüez conference on the discourse of disability revisited, twelve years later

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AFTERWORD: THE MAYAGÜEZ CONFERENCE ON THE DISCOURSE OF DISABILITY REVISITED, TWELVE YEARS LATER

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It is with considerable pleasure that I put together this special edition on the discourse of disability for *Atenea*, the journal of the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez. Twelve years ago, in March 1993, our campus hosted the first conference ever to be held on disability and the arts. Although we were extremely pleased to have our venture described as “ground-breaking” and “seminal,” we were at the time unaware of the impact that it would have in the coming years. When Pierre-Etienne Cudmore and I (the coordinators) started planning the conference, in January 1992, our aims were ambitious but modest. Our stated goal—free from a specific theoretic perspective—was to unite the global and the local, and thus to raise issues and questions about the discourse of disability in both general and specific contexts. In this sense, certainly, the conference was most successful in that it attracted international participants from various countries—Canada, France, Greece, India, New Zealand, Puerto Rico, and the United States—and did indeed produce an impact on both the global academic community as well as the local community on the island. We had made a determined effort not to focus on one at the expense of the other, and holding the conference on an island that is bilingual and (at least) tri-cultural highlighted some of these issues. When we coined the title “The Discourse of Disability,”¹ we felt it would not translate into Spanish. The Spanish title we chose for the conference, “Congreso Otras Habilidades,” was, therefore, an independent title and not a translation. The

¹ It later struck me that the title echoed Valentine’s advice to Silvia to “leave off discourse of disability” in Shakespeare’s *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Act II Sc. iv), but this echo was quite unintentional—our goal had been, of course, to explore rather than “leave off” such a discourse.

complexities of the bilingual issues that we encountered mirrored the cultural complexities of the discourse(s) of disability when seen in a global light, making us aware that there was no *one* discourse of disability.

In keeping with our aim to unite the general and the specific, we attempted to bring together not only artists of international renown and academics from a wide variety of disciplines but also local individuals and non-academics who could lend their own expertise to the discussions on the subject of disability. The cultural events of the conference—a book exhibit, a theatrical performance of Gillian Plowman’s “Cecily,” a film festival of popular and documentary films about disability, and a musical performance—were integral parts of the conference. The Mayor of the city of Mayagüez, José Guillermo Rodríguez, gave us his full support, providing the city’s Yagüez Theatre to us for a free violin concert by Henry Hutchinson Negrón and Luz Negrón de Hutchinson. The concert featured works by composers with disabilities, and was followed by a reception at the Town Hall, hosted by the Mayor.

The conference therefore successfully addressed the discourse of disability in its widest sense. What had initially appeared to be circumscription—the initial proposal we gave the University Administration stated that “the conference would focus on the humanistic rather than the therapeutic aspects of disability”—proved to provide discursive expansion while demonstrating that the line could not always be drawn: today’s humanism grows out of yesterday’s therapy, and vice versa. These discussions took place in both the academic and the quotidian contexts, as we discovered that in spite of the recently passed ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act), our campus was still far from accessible. Faced with the immediacy of a paucity of ramps, elevators, and wide-access bathrooms, and the absence of wheelchair-accessible transport, we were advised by many of our colleagues to call off the conference on the grounds that “This will end up being an embarrassment; our campus is simply not ready to host an event of this nature,” but we decided we had to take this risk. At the time, they were right. One month before the conference we were indeed “not ready.”

In the weeks immediately preceeding the conference, however, ramps were built, TTY machines were acquired, old bathrooms were modified and new ones were built, and vans were ordered. These were welcome but nonetheless not unexpected changes. Thus one of the goals of the conference—to create an immediate, local impact—saw prompt success. The wider and long-term impact of the

conference was much less expected.

Several issues that have since then become key points in Disability Studies were confronted at the conference. To promote a genuine exchange of ideas, we decided not to hold any sessions simultaneously, and in addition to giving the conference a sense of intimacy that our participants valued, this decision contributed to the cross-cultural understanding we wanted the conference to generate. The participants adopted a wide range of perspectives to look at the complex ways in which art and disability have been interconnected. These multiple viewpoints allowed a full interpretation of the relationship between the two, and as conference organizers we did not adopt any one official ideological or theoretic position. By opening with Ved Mehta's keynote address, the first plenary session addressed the issues of the differing cultural attitudes towards disability in developed and developing countries, issues that Mehta illustrated by describing his own experiences. The session also raised the issue of whether separatism would promote or deter the rights of people with disabilities, and especially, whether a "separatist affiliation" in a disabled artist was desirable or not. Mehta, who was born in British India and has been blind since childhood, chose to dissociate himself from the separatist aspects of the disability rights movement. As an artist he believed that his blindness would be an integral part of his art were he writing an autobiography but would have no bearing on his work if he were writing, say, a biography of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India.

Not all members of the audience agreed with this position, and the papers that followed reflected the variety of positions and interpretations globally present. Following Mehta's address, Harlan Hahn's paper, "Toward an Aesthetics of Disability: Classical and Evolving Western Images," was a more radical endorsement of the separatist position, emphasizing the "intimate connection between disability and esthetic issues." Hahn foresaw the "eventual emergence of a 'disabilityst' perspective" comparable to those of the perspectives of feminism and ethnic minorities, and he endorsed the position that "viewpoints derived from extensive personal experience with disability could eventually have a significant impact on the canons of art and literature."

Several papers explored the intersections between disability, gender, and sexuality, again from a variety of perspectives. Chris Bullock's "Reflections on Blindness and Masculinity in Raymond Carver's 'Cathedral'" argued that in addition to the theme of "figurative blindness" that dominated interpretation of "Cathedral," the story

illustrated the traps of gender stereotypes from which Robert, the blind character, was free. Both Martha Stoddard-Holmes (“‘My Old Delightful Sensation’: Blindness and Sexuality in Wilkie Collins’s *Poor Miss Finch*”) and Cindy LaCom (“‘It is More than Lame’: Physical Disability in Charlotte Yonge’s *The Clever Woman of the Family* and Anthony Trollope’s *Barchester Towers*”) focused on Victorian attitudes towards disability in women, examining the “sweetness,” “purity,” and asexuality of the Victorian stereotype as well as the exceptions to this stereotype who appear as marginalized but sexually dynamic characters. Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s “How to Represent a ‘Powerful Woman’: The Disabled Figure in Twentieth-Century Novels of African-American Identity” examined novels by Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, and Audre Lord, tracing the historical shift from the “modernist rhetoric of despair” that dominated Petry to the “rhetoric of positive identity politics” in Morrison and Lord. Maria Anastasopoulou examined the mutilation of the male in nineteenth-century British novels by women, including Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Going beyond the canon, Brenda Robert’s “Disabled Women Writers: In Search of a Text of Their Own” demonstrated how autobiographical narratives by disabled women reflected the impact of patriarchy on their lives. Rebecca Bell-Metereau’s paper “Film Images: The Un-Perfect Body” contrasted the portrayal of disabilities in men and women in film: in films like “Wait Until Dark” and “Children of a Lesser God,” the disabled female protagonists (played by Audrey Hepburn and Marlee Matlin, respectively) generally look good, whereas men are often shown unshaven and unkempt (like Tom Cruise in “Born on the Fourth of July”), or even covered with urine (like Jon Voight in “Coming Home”).

John Woodcock’s paper “Sexual Loss and Personal Identity in Two Films: ‘Whose Life Is It Anyway?’ and ‘Born on the Fourth of July’” was read in absentia. It examined the portrayal of male “impotence” in recent American film—with many members of the audience questioning the equation of erectile (dys)function with (dis)ability—while Katie Krohn’s provocative paper “Images of Disability on Living Canvas: Men who Cross-Dress as Disabled Women” first explored the link between amputation and sexuality in folklore and mythology, and then examined the prevalent, documented practice of men who seek self-amputation in order to cross-dress as disabled women.

Another equally political issue that the conference raised was the nexus of disability and war. Our second plenary session featured a keynote address in Spanish by the late Sotero Rivera-Avilés, who died a few months after the conference. Born in Adjuntas, Puerto Rico, Rivera-Avilés was a veteran of the U.S.-Korea war whose poetry and

non-fiction challenge the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. This theme was continued in Lou Thompson's paper "The Wounds of War: Literary Representations of Disabled Vietnam Veterans," which examined the physical and psychological challenges confronting disabled Vietnam War veterans in Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones*, Lanford Wilson's *Fifth of July*, Joyce Carol Oates' *Out of Place* and films such as "Coming Home." The relationship between war and politics was also examined by Alberto Traldi and Josef Modzelewski in their analyses of the Italian novelist Ignazio Silone and the Czech-born German novelist Libuse Monikova, respectively.

Another group of speakers examined the ways in which disability defined the work of writers and artists with physical disabilities. Margaret Bruzelius' "An Altered World: Abilities and Disabilities—A Series of Drawings by Marcy Hermansader" focused on the ways in which the American artist Marcy Hermansader used the "banality" of the wheelchair pictograph to "destabilize the viewer's way of imagining the human body," while Jeffrey Folks's "The Enduring Chill': Physical Disability in Flannery O'Connor's *Everything that Rises Must Converge*" demonstrated how disability provided "unique psychological insights" for O'Connor. María Solá and Loreina Santos examined the impact of disability on the art of Puerto Rican artists Jeannette Blasini and Jorge Luis Morales, respectively. Solá's paper illustrated the ways in which Blasini had drawn on Frida Kahlo in her own painting.

Several speakers focused on the pervasive stereotyping of disabled people that has manifested itself in literary texts. Nancy Wurzel's paper on Willa Cather examined *Lucy Gayheart* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* to show how Cather exploits the superstitious fear that her disabled characters may provide. Barbara Bergquist's "From Fear to Acceptance: The Physically Disabled Come Out of the Closet" examined the recent changes in self-representation by people with disabilities, while Karen Gutman's paper addressed the sentimental portrayal of blindness in Leonard Gershe's play "Butterflies are Free." On the other hand, David Richman's "Yeats and the Sightless Vision" demonstrated the absence of sentimental stereotyping in W.B. Yeats, whose disabled characters are even portrayed as swindlers or thieves. Likewise, a group of papers explored the portrayal of disability for subversive purposes, such as Irene Mizrahi's paper on blindness in contemporary theatre, Eileen Howe's paper on Manuel Puig, and Alain Vizier's paper on Antonin Artaud's correspondence with Jacques Rivière. Juliette Parnell-Smith considered the way in which physical blindness was used as a metaphor by André Gide

("Blindness: A Physical or Perceptual Characteristic? A Study of André Gide's Novellas").

Another theme, which we had originally considered for a separate panel, was the relationship between disability and eating disorders, represented at the conference by Marcy Epstein's "Dis/ability as Dis/course: Eating Dis/order and the Challenged Culture." This topic would have also been explored by Kristina Chew's "Bodily Loss: Anorexia and Amputation" and Ellen Whittier's paper on Byron (which had intended to explore the relationship between Byron's own eating disorders and his play, "The Deformed Transformed"). Unfortunately, the latter two were unable to attend the conference.

The intersection of disability with language was explored by a separate panel. H-Dirksen Bauman's paper, "Dancing Hands: Toward a Poetics of American Sign Language Poetry." In addition to providing an introduction to American Sign Language for the audience, Bauman's paper showed that its "potency stems from the performative immediacy of its haiku-like concrete imagery." Tess Lloyd looked at the "Wild Child" metaphor in Herman Melville's *Pierre*, while Patrick McDonagh, examining the work of the Irish writer Christy Brown, analyzed the relationship between cerebral palsy and political resistance.

Some of these problematics and complexities were traced to the construction of the Western subject, which marginalizes disability through its conceptual links to mainstream abilities. Scott Pollard scrutinized the way in which the Chilean writer José Donoso's apparently subversive disabled characters actually reinforce the link between the traditional subject and the bourgeois social ideal through the novel's "location of this ideal in a perfect human body" in his paper "Disability and Subjectivity in José Donoso's *The Obscene Bird of the Night*." The subversiveness of this text was also examined by Victoria Cox in her paper "Otro cuerpo y otra sociedad proponen los seres con 'diferentes' capacidades en la novela *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*." David Mitchell's "The Cultural (Dis)Logic of Disability" examined many of the cultural expectations that have led to the construction of "disability." Susan Crutchfield's "Take Me To Your Cinema: Blind/Sighted Discourse(s) in Narrative Film," focusing on the 1991 Australian film "Proof," deconstructed the ways in which blind and sighted discourse appear in narrative film. In contrast, Maura Brady's paper "Artists and Surgeons: The Physically Disabled Subject in Dunn's *Geek Love*" showed how Katherine Dunn's characters attempt to "construct themselves as subjects in a culture that has denied them this power."

Although from a number of disciplines, the speakers at the conference were, by and large, academics, and we had therefore especially looked forward to Rus Cooper-Dowda's paper, since her examination of the Independent Living Movement would provide an activist's perspective. Although unfortunately she could not attend the conference, we were able to read excerpts from her paper, which compared the transformation of the beast in Disney's "Beauty and the Beast" to portrayals of people with disabilities. John Carbutt also examined the political implications of filming disability in New Zealand, using a number of documentary films as examples. Some of these films, such as "Doc," "Miles Turns 21," and "See What I Mean," had been screened as part of the conference's film festival.

Finally, Ann Cooper Albright's "Moving Across Difference: Dance and Disability," the closing paper of the last panel of the conference, provided a challenging deconstruction of ability and disability. By exploring the impact of physically disabled dancers on various dance communities across the United States, Albright demonstrated the ways in which these dancers "radically deconstruct prevailing notions of beauty, grace, and physical ability in order to reconstruct the meaning of dance."

We titled this last panel "Towards a Poetics of Disability," which was also the title we later selected for the proceedings of the conference that we had hoped to publish. Unfortunately this project did not materialize: funding and released time were difficult to get at the time, and by the time they became available it seemed that Disability Studies had become an established field and the need for a book with papers from a past conference had been obviated. Our plans to repeat the conference six years later were squelched by Hurricane Georges, which had a devastating impact on the island and the University campus. This brief overview cannot capture the actual spirit of the conference nor the engaging discussions that it provoked, but the conference programme has been reproduced in its entirety as an Appendix in this journal issue, and we hope that it will provide a sense of the conference as a whole.

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