

From Avoidance to Appreciation:

The Cultural and Social Values of Disability Studies and Interdisciplinarity

Professor David Bolt, Inaugural Lecture

Liverpool Hope University, 16 October, 2019

Abstract: More than half a century ago avoidance was deemed an act of prejudice by social scientists Gordon Allport and Erving Goffman; identified as a problem for the growing disability movement and thus as a fundamental concern for the field of disability studies. More recently I have shown that this avoidance takes many forms in academia, one of which is curricular, whereby a course considers representations of disability that it nonetheless fails to meet with informed critical work. Such critical avoidance is addressed in part by the very acknowledgement of disability studies as an important academic field in its own right but also through its meaningful engagement with other disciplines, an interdisciplinary approach demonstrable in the Centre for Culture and Disability Studies; the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*; the Literary Disability Studies book series; the biennial Disability and Disciplines conference; the Disability Studies MA; and a number of book projects, including the new monograph, *Cultural Disability Studies in Education*, and multivolume publication, *A Cultural History of Disability*. The premise of my sustained leadership in this and other such work is that interdisciplinarity enables curricular reform that leads to the recognition of non-normative knowledge, more complex understandings of disability, and changes in social attitudes from avoidance to appreciation.

You can read my body but you'll never read my books

Ian Dury, Spazticus (Autisticus), 1981

Introduction:

The Embodied Premise

Born in Cardiff; raised in Newcastle-under-Lyme; made in Liverpool: this is my story. My parents and I moved from South Wales to England when I was a young child and I subsequently lived in Staffordshire for four decades. It was there that I went to school; forged lifelong friendships; wrote, recorded, and performed numerous punk and pop songs; fathered my daughter Nisha; and, following my younger brother Stephen's example, ultimately made it to and through university. My professional connection with Merseyside was initiated in 2008 when I signed an ongoing publishing contract with Liverpool University Press, only to be

furthered in 2009 when I began a lectureship in disability studies at Liverpool Hope University that, in 2018, culminated in the professorship inaugurated here.

In the name of positionality, I must begin by positing something about my own experience of disability. I have had a visual impairment since childhood, which was diagnosed when I was in my teens, and a physical impairment since I was in my twenties, diagnosed in my forties. These things have impacted variously on my personal life, partly because I no longer perceive by visual means, partly because I now take dangerous medication on a long-term basis, and partly because I have come to engage with the world in ways that derive from beyond what I refer to as the normative divide. The academic relevance is that, though deemed and rendered comorbid in some circles, this non-normative embodiment provides me with a profound understanding of disability on which I have drawn in the coinage of critical terms, the analysis of media and cultural representations, the development of theoretical understandings, the introduction of concepts and models, and so on. My positionality, then, broadly speaking, is that I am a disabled academic who professes disability studies.

As I outline the academic premise of my work I realise that my positionality may seem quite straightforward and thus uncontroversial. After all, in other fields there are obvious parallels, such as religious academics who profess theology, or academics of colour who profess postcolonialism, and in any case within disability studies most of the key figures are themselves disabled. However, the salient complication I tend to raise is that on a global scale disability studies remains a relatively rare field in the academy. Although prejudice relating to access for disabled academics and students has improved significantly, if not sufficiently, course content often remains uninformed. The trouble is that prejudice, as social scientist Gordon Allport recognised some sixty-five years ago, takes many forms, one of which, according to his five-level model, is avoidance. With this in mind I have drawn attention, in various venues, to the academic anomaly whereby disability is abundant in primary material and yet disability studies remains absent from secondary reading. I call this state of affairs, which may be said to constitute the academic premise of my work, critical avoidance.

‘You can read my body but you’ll never read my books’, sang disabled punk icon Ian Dury in the early 1980s, implicit in which is an embodied illustration of what I mean by critical avoidance. I am always pleased when our wonderful Disability Studies MA students find and quote this lyric, with which I have been familiar since I left school, because it expresses the crux of a fundamental issue simply but so very powerfully. Although disabled people are looked upon with persistence we tend to be consulted and acknowledged with some reluctance, as if the very fabric of society, rather than the inequity of the normative social order, would be under great threat. In the academy, for example, disability is always a topic of discussion, from basic accessibility to social justice, from cultural texts to psychological experiments, and so on, but it is still relatively rarely considered as a source of knowledge. What is more, far too many enthusiastic assertions of disability rights, community, advocacy, and so on, fade rapidly when the normative social order is disrupted. Alas, the people who spend the most time reading into the disabled body are not necessarily

the ones who read the books of disabled people, especially the works that posit non-normative epistemology, such as those on which this lecture is based.

Against Avoidance:

Uncovering the Metanarratives of Disability

My first book-length response to critical avoidance was an AHRC-funded doctorate that identified and critiqued the tropes of blindness in the Anglophone writing of modernity. Thanks to the exemplary supervision of Prof Shaun Richards and invaluable encouragement of Prof Martin McQuillen and others at the University of Staffordshire, I completed this interdisciplinary project in 2004. I then published several peer-reviewed articles that were based on the thesis but continued to refine the thinking to the extent that a decade later my first monograph (pictured on the slide) became part of Prof David T. Mitchell and Dr Sharon L. Snyder's esteemed Corporealities book series. That is to say, *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing* was published by the University of Michigan Press in 2014. The book was met with a handful of positive reviews and thus addressed critical avoidance insofar as it increased the likelihood of literary engagements with blindness being informed by disability studies.

According to my understandings, the cultural and social values of disability studies are interrelated. In *The Metanarrative of Blindness* I took as my starting point the concept of normate reductionism, derived from the work of Prof Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (Emory University, Atlanta). She has famously referred to the received notion of a so-called normal person as the normate, and suggested that most destructive to the potential for continuing relations is the normate's frequent assumption that a disability cancels out other qualities; reduces the complex person to one attribute. I expanded on this model of social friction by adding that normate reductionism simultaneously invokes an array of extraneous details. For me, the complex person who has an impairment is not only reduced to that impairment but also keyed to the metanarrative of disability (i.e. a vast array of received notions and universals that find currency in culture). In these terms, cultural representations can have a major impact on social encounters, which is why I value interdisciplinary challenges to critical avoidance so highly.

The interdisciplinary field to which my first monograph contributed was literary disability studies. It occurred to me along the way, though, that a more impactful method to address critical avoidance would be a full volume dedicated to a single classic work of literature, written from perspectives grounded in disability studies. The exemplary novel I had in mind was Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, about which I had published something but knew a couple of New York colleagues who were real experts. I am therefore eternally thankful that Prof Julia Miele Rodas (City University of New York) and Prof Elizabeth J. Donaldson (New York Institute of Technology) joined me as book editors, that *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability* (pictured on the slide) was

published by Ohio State University Press in 2012. Deemed a ‘coming of age moment for the study of disability’ in the foreword by Distinguished Prof Lennard J. Davis (University of Illinois at Chicago), this critically acclaimed volume went some way to changing the advanced teaching of *Jane Eyre*, as evidenced by the prompt inclusion of our approach in the novel’s *York Notes*.

Given the success of our edited volume on bringing disability studies to *Jane Eyre*, I subsequently invited Prof Donaldson and Prof Rodas to join me in proposing a book series that would work along similar interdisciplinary lines. We developed the idea together and soon found a publisher who shared our enthusiasm for the proposed project. This being so, Palgrave Macmillan/Springer published the first volume in the Literary Disability Studies book series in 2015. We now have seven titles in the series (pictured on the slide) and the eighth is in press. The list comprises a diverse range of monographs and edited collections but all volumes are dedicated to the exploration of literature from a disability studies perspective.

My initial engagement with literary disability studies often expanded into broader cultural matters, a not uncommon interdisciplinary development that was demonstrable in the academic periodical I founded in 2006. The *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* (pictured on the slide) was then launched as a biannual online publication in 2007 and, thanks to Liverpool University Press, became a triannual print-online publication in 2009 and a quarterly print-online publication in 2017. The editorial board has come to include Hope colleagues Dr Ria Cheyne, Dr Claire Penketh, Ms Irene Rose, and Comments Editor Dr Owen Barden, alongside 65 external members such as Book Reviews Editor Prof Ann M. Fox (Davidson College). It publishes full research articles along with comments and book reviews, which makes it an important venue for esteemed professors, as well as for the dissemination of early-career writing, as demonstrated in the past by Hope colleagues such as Dr David Feeney. With the international support of Project MUSE and Scopus, as well as a long list of guest editors, including Dr Ana Bê, Dr Ella Huston, and Dr Erin Pritchard, among others, we are now set to publish the 40th interdisciplinary issue.

From and with the journal grew the Centre for Culture and Disability Studies (CCDS) that was founded at Hope in 2009. The CCDS is now celebrating its tenth anniversary and, as Director, I have been principal organiser of more than sixty research seminars across four different series, including one that resulted in an edited collection, *Changing Social Attitudes Toward Disability: Perspectives from Historical, Cultural, and Educational Studies* (pictured on the slide). First published in 2014 as part of the Routledge Advances in Disability Studies series, this volume elicited multiple positive reviews, as well as a Korean translation in 2018. It brought together fifteen authors, including Hope colleagues Dr Owen Barden, Dr Marie Caslin, Dr Alan Hodkinson, and Dr Claire Penketh, as well as external scholars such as the internationally recognised Prof Catherine Prendergast (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). It also set historical and educational foci to which, as illustrated in this lecture, I return in subsequent interdisciplinary book projects.

Alongside the seminars, the biennial conference has become a major strength of the CCDS. Starting in 2011, we have held five of these events, one of which resulted in *Disability, Avoidance, and the Academy: Challenging Resistance* (pictured on the slide), a Routledge collection that I edited with Head of Disability Studies Dr Claire Penketh in 2016. Expanding the concept of critical avoidance in multiple directions, this book brought together more than twenty authors, such as Hope colleagues Dr Owen Barden, Dr Alan Hodkinson, and Dr Laura Waite, as well as external scholars from elsewhere in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Hungary, India, and the United States, including internationally recognised professors Peter Beresford (Brunel University London), Kathy Boxall (Edith Cowan University), Ann M. Fox (Davidson College), and David T. Mitchell (George Washington University). Now known as Disability and Disciplines, the conference on which the book was based has become an important event in the calendar of anyone who works across the disciplinary lines of education, culture, and disability studies.

Like culture and education, history has also become a recurrent interest in the interdisciplinary book projects on which I have worked. A few years ago I was approached by Bloomsbury about a six-volume publication on this topic and promptly asked the eminent Prof Robert McRuer (George Washington University) to join me in its general editorship. Together we appointed internationally recognised editors for volumes on Antiquity, The Middle Ages, The Renaissance, The Long Eighteenth Century, The Long Nineteenth Century, and The Modern Age. With explicit reference to eight conditions of non-normative embodiment, including deafness, blindness, mobility impairment, atypical speech, mental health issues, learning difficulties, extraordinary bodies, and chronic illness, each of the six volumes reapproaches cultural history by bringing disability from the margins to the centre. Consequently, due to be published in December, *A Cultural History of Disability* (pictured on the slide) is a set of books predicted to make an important contribution to the interdisciplinary reduction of critical avoidance.

Towards Appreciation:

The Tripartite Model of Disability

The books I have referred to thus far have illustrated, on a fairly descriptive level, some of my endeavours to address the problem of critical avoidance; but, as mentioned from the outset, far from being reductive, I want to acknowledge and advocate appreciation. This being so, I have introduced and developed the tripartite model of disability. The purpose of this model is to assist and recognise departures from one-dimensional representations of disability. The technical terminology of the model refers to normative positivisms, non-normative negativisms, and non-normative positivisms (the last of which has a Foucaudian lineage that came to me via the work of Prof David T. Mitchell and Dr Sharon L. Snyder). It is my proposition that disability should be considered in relation to all three perspectives (in brief, indifference, difficulties, and qualities) if there is to be more of a move towards complex appreciation.

Applied in the rationale and content of both the CCDS conference and the Disability Studies MA, among other things, the tripartite model is fundamental to a third CCDS book published as part of the Routledge Advances in Disability Studies series. *Cultural Disability Studies in Education: Interdisciplinary Navigations of the Normative Divide* (pictured on the slide) moves historically from late nineteenth to early twenty-first-century representations and in so doing connects with aesthetics, film studies, Holocaust studies, gender studies, happiness studies, popular music studies, humour studies, and media studies. In the monograph, officially published this year, the tripartite model of disability is applied in the textual analysis of the public image of two rock stars, Freddie Mercury and Johnny Cash, from which emerges a non-normative social aesthetic that counters the metanarrative of disability considered at the start of this lecture (the focus of another book on which I have just started to work).

Conclusion:

Disrupting the Normative Social Order

The books to which I refer here are symbolic and indeed indicative of non-normative epistemology that has the potential to address critical avoidance along interdisciplinary lines. In the terms of the tripartite model, first, normative positivisms (or instances of indifference) are illustrated in the academy when disability falls beneath or beyond the realms of consideration, as though somehow irrelevant. Second, non-normative negativisms (or difficulties) include the troubles faced when attitudinal, systemic, and physical barriers are erected and endorsed – including the effect of critical avoidance, whereby disability is considered but without the informed field of disability studies. Third, non-normative positivisms (or qualities) are the interdisciplinary enhancements to learning and teaching – and knowledge more broadly – brought about by the profound appreciation of disability. In illustrating this trajectory, I focus on books because they can be deemed so threatening to the normative social order, as history has infamously shown, and I am even aware that tutors have been discouraged from setting some of the titles considered here (if now hardly an embodiment of punk rock I guess I am still that little bit controversial after all). This brings me to the overarching point of my work: to address the inequity of the normative social order, the institutional and cultural rendering of disabled people as eternal recipients whose contributions must be nominal. Insisting that we recognise knowledge alongside needs, I return to Ian Dury's epigraph to amend it and assert, *read our bodies, as you know you will, but read our books too*.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to everyone in attendance at this lecture. In particular I must thank the school administrator Amy Scott for organising the event, at rather short notice, in her characteristically positive way. More broadly I must thank my manager Claire Penketh and

academic support worker Holly Lightburn, as well as the other core members of the Centre for Culture and Disability studies and board members of the Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies. On a personal level I must say that I know how lucky I am to be able to give this lecture in the presence of such dear colleagues alongside my family, especially my parents, brother, and daughter.