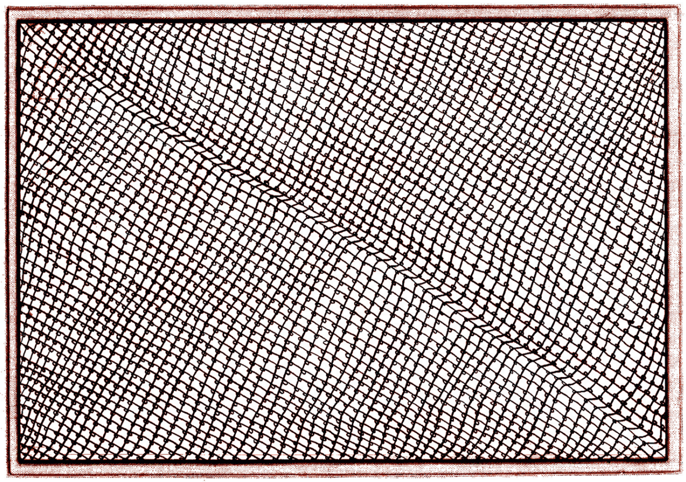

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Culture – Theory – Disability

Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies

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From:

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Culture – Theory – Disability
Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies

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Which theoretical and methodological approaches of contemporary cultural criticism resonate within the field of disability studies? What can cultural studies gain by incorporating disability more fully into its toolbox for critical analysis?
Culture – Theory – Disability features contributions by leading international cultural disability studies scholars which are complemented with a diverse range of responses from across the humanities spectrum.
This essential volume encourages the problematization of disability in connection with critical theories of literary and cultural representation, aesthetics, politics, science and technology, sociology, and philosophy.

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Foreword: Culture – Theory – Disability

Hanjo Berressem, Moritz Ingwersen, Anne Waldschmidt

The seed for this collection was laid at the international conference *Contact Zones: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies* which was hosted and co-organized by the International Research Unit in Disability Studies (iDiS) and the Institute of American Literature and Culture at the University of Cologne in 2012. It is noteworthy that this project has its own history. While the interrogation of disability in traditional (special needs) educational environments had long been on the research and teaching agendas at Cologne's Faculty of the Human Sciences housing the Departments of Psychology and Education (*Humanwissenschaftliche Fakultät*), the focus was significantly expanded with the faculty's establishment of the first university position for disability studies in a German-speaking country in 2008, specializing in the sociology of disability and disability policy. Since then, this position has proven a stimulus for spreading the approach of critical disability studies across the university and beyond. In parallel, the Literature and Philosophy Departments of the neighboring Faculty of the Humanities (*Philosophische Fakultät*) had discovered disability as a critical category of cultural analysis. As a result, a productive dialogue between graduate students from both faculties emerged, addressing disability from the perspectives of literary and film studies, sociology and political science, inclusive and special education.

Eventually, this conversation led to this collection, which aims to encourage the problematization of disability in connection with critical theories of literary and cultural representation, aesthetics, philosophies and sociologies of the body, the study of society and politics, science and technology. It links up with the interdisciplinary approaches to disability that can be found at the center of such foundational publications as Lennard J. Davis' *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1996), David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* (2001), Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory* (2006), Margrit Shildrick's *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality* (2009), Tobin Siebers' *Disability Theory* (2008) and *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), and David Bolt's *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* (since 2006).

The aim of this collection is to provide a platform not only for the thought of many of the leading scholars in the comparably young discourse of cultural disability studies, but also for some of the innovative voices at its disciplinary fringes. In this sense, it is set up to facilitate a dialogue between scholars working from within British, Czech, German and US-American discourses. Many of our contributors have chosen to focus their interrogation of disability through readings of the visual and literary arts. Our goal was to encourage contributions anchored in practice as well as theory-driven contributions. As a result, a number of essays show a self-reflexive engagement with disability studies not only as a heterogeneous transdisciplinary academic apparatus, but also as an expression of the social, political, cultural, and corporeal experiences of persons living with impairments and disabilities.

Drawing inspiration from Erving Goffman's interaction theory and taking up his idea of a party, this collection is organized along the triad of an *introduction*, the establishment of *contact*, and a series of prolonged *encounters*. It opens with two introductory essays by Anne Waldschmidt and Hanjo Berressem. **Anne Waldschmidt** explores the potentials of a cultural model of disability by discussing existing versions and the strengths and weaknesses of the 'social model.' Following a broad notion of culture, she argues for an analytical perspective that investigates the relations between discourses of categorization and institutionalization, the material world, 'ways of doing things,' modes of subjectivation, and their consequences for persons with and without disabilities. Tracing a link between disability studies and poststructuralism, **Hanjo Berressem** finds in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari a productive framework to replace the nature|culture binary with a multiplicitous field of "machinic production" within which all life articulates itself as "differently constrained." With recourse to examples that range from constrained writing to the aesthetics of stumbling, stuttering, and the prosthetic soundscapes in William Gibson's cyberpunk fiction, he illustrates how positions of alleged disability emerge as sites of creativity and production.

Establishing a contact with the field, three figureheads of cultural disability studies, Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Robert McRuer, provide entry points into *Culture – Theory – Disability* with contributions that exemplify what it means to read disability through culture. With reverberations of Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell's literary analysis of disability as a 'narrative prosthesis,' **Lennard J. Davis** builds on the observation that "media loves disability" and takes a critical look at the casting of non-disabled actors for roles with disabilities in a wide selection of mainstream film and television productions ranging from *The Big Bang Theory* to *Pandora*. Drawing attention to fair employment discrepancies in the movie business, he makes a call similar to that of **Rosemarie Garland-Thomson**, who advocates for what she calls "inclusive world-building." In sharp contradistinction to eugenic agendas, such an initiative would emphasize the generative rather than the restrictive potential of disability in contributing to the "community of embodied humankind." Through a close reading of Pedro Almodóvar's film *La Mala Educación*, **Robert McRuer** develops a "critically disordered position" that aligns disability interests with positions within queer theory that are similarly in favor of a non-universalizing critique of neoliberal politics of tolerance and identity.

The subsequent contributions are to be read as *encounters* which, in the sense of Goffman, imply 'focused gatherings' of diverse groups and involve conversations, debates, and controversies. Six 'keynotes' are each complemented by a two-tier set of responses from established and emerging scholars who offer ways to make the disability paradigm productive within their own fields of expertise.

Dan Goodley provides a detailed account of the transformative factors within the field of disability studies that have contributed to the emergence of *critical* disability studies in the 21st century. Contextualizing the work of Garland-Thomson, Shildrick, Davis, Siebers, and McRuer, among others, he spells out some of the challenges and potentials of theorizing disability beyond what is known as the 'social model,' without losing touch with its embodied reality in activism and practice. Following the trajectory of Goodley's overview, **Konstantin Butz** highlights the concept of intersectionality to locate sites of revolutionary potential in the gap between a movement's physical materiality and its codification as a discursive gesture. With recourse to the Frankfurt School and the works of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida, **Rouven Schlegel** interrogates the notion of 'critique' in critical disability studies and offers a deconstructionist approach to impairment.

Tobin Siebers argues against the perception of a metonymical relationship between disability and pain, shifting away from the portrayal of bodily pain as an individual identity marker towards the experience of "epistemological pain" as a common thread which unites people with disability in a political struggle for recognition. Following Siebers' claim that personal experiences of pain and disability identities are interrelated, **Andreas Sturm** explores the implications for the identity politics of disability rights movements, while considering that due to the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities collective identities are in the foreseeable future likely to be framed through human rights discourses. With reference to the performance artist Bob Flanagan, **Arta Karāne** uses Siebers' article as a springboard to offer an example of how the experience of pain may serve as a source of self-empowerment and as a critique of normative performances of masculinity.

Margrit Shildrick mobilizes the thought of Deleuze, Guattari and Derrida to conceptualize life with prosthetic aids in terms of "a potentially celebratory re-imagining of the multiple possibilities of corporeal extensiveness." As a proponent of critical disability studies, she points to the ways in which the discussion of disability even within the discourse of disability theory sometimes unquestioningly subscribes to a modernist notion of selfhood. In his response, **Jan Söffner** strengthens the phenomenological tradition in Shildrick's account of embodiment and suggests alternative theoretical frameworks beyond the writings of Deleuze and Guattari pointing to the work of Evan Thompson and Francisco Varela. **Moritz Ingwersen** connects Shildrick's proposal of transcorporeal subjectivity to a paradigm shift in the natural sciences that highlights the role of open systems, in order to distill an appeal to ethics that can also be found in the disability rights activism of Amanda Baggs.

Taking as a starting point a comparative reading of the athletes of the 2012 Paralympics and the protagonists of the X-Men movie franchise, **Karin Harrasser** offers a critical perspective on the semantics of disability in the context of technological enhancement. In resonance with Shildrick's account of prosthetic corporeality and with reference to Bruno Latour and Deleuze, she draws attention to the problematic distinction between human and technological performance. **Eleana Vaja** uses the work of French philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon to further illuminate the relationship between body and prosthesis and to understand the reciprocal determination between the technical object and its physical milieu. With particular attention to Harrasser's notion of 'the parahuman,' **Olga Tarapata** explores similar lines by drawing on the poetics of American cyberpunk author William Gibson in order to offer an alternative model for non-normative engagements between bodies and environments.

Ria Cheyne's article is an example of the incorporation of disability into the toolbox of literary criticism. She attends to the popular genre of the romance, noting that "romances featuring disabled heroes or heroines are uniquely positioned to challenge public perceptions of disabled people as asexual." Via a close-reading of novels by Mary Balogh, Cheyne illustrates a literary attitude that breaks with the dominant depiction of disability as a metaphor of insufficiency. Contrasting Cheyne's analysis with a reading of Franz Kafka, **Martin Roussel** responds by problematizing the relationship between the interpretation and the representation of fictional scenes of disability. Similarly, **Benjamin Haas** highlights the active role of the reader in the construction of literary meaning and points to the necessity of critically reflecting current concepts of normalcy beyond the level of fictional narrative.

Kateřina Kolářová dissects the political rhetoric of the post-socialist transformation in the Czech Republic to reveal a correspondence between a semantics of illness, disability, cure, and neoliberal austerity policies. Borrowing from the vocabulary of affect theorist Lauren Berlant and McRuer's writings on crip theory, Kolářová proposes a "cripistemological" recoding of what neoliberalism seem to leave by the wayside. **Heidi Helmhold** responds to Kolářová's analysis by suggesting different interpretations of Lauren Berlant and Jan Šibík's photographic art. Reflecting on the value of disability in the political context of post-socialist Czechoslovakia, she furthermore builds a bridge to the devalorization of education in the wake of recent university reforms in Germany. With reference to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, **Arne Müller** supplements Kolářová's analysis by positing the merits of an intersectional approximation of the categories of disability and social class.

Disability Goes Cultural

The Cultural Model of Disability as an Analytical Tool

Anne Waldschmidt

Even today, with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) adopted in December 2006 and disability-related discourses, structures, and practices gradually changing throughout the world according to the new human rights approach, there are many people who still take disability as a simple natural fact. Not only myself, but probably other critical disability studies scholars also feel that Lennard J. Davis expresses a common experience:

> "When it comes to disability, 'normal' people are quite willing to volunteer solutions, present anecdotes, recall from a vast array of films instances they take for fact. No one would dare to make such a leap into Heideggerian philosophy for example or the art of the Renaissance. But disability seems so obvious – a missing limb, blindness, deafness. What could be simpler to understand? One simply has to imagine the loss of the limb, the absent sense, and one is half-way there." (xvi)

However, it is not only 'normal people' who tend to underestimate the complexity of disability. Academia itself often chooses to apply somewhat undifferentiated approaches to this phenomenon. When it comes to disability, rehabilitation sciences, medicine, psychology, education, and social policy research dominate the field. To avoid misunderstandings: Social protection and rehabilitative assistance are important; persons with disabilities do rely on societies committed to the principles of solidarity and equality instead of leaving them to a destiny of negligence and ignorance. Still, this is only one side of the coin. Traditional approaches ignore that impairment is a common experience in human life and that we all are differently able-bodied. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that while most people are likely to be impaired at some point during their lifetime being disabled is, as Tom Shakespeare puts it, "a specific social identity of a minority" (295). Why then are certain differences subsumed under the label 'disabled' and others considered as ‘normal’ manifestations of diversity? Why do modern societies see the need to categorize people as ‘normals’ and ‘deviants’? Why and how is disability negatively valued? In which ways is ‘otherness’ – and disability is a form of alterity – (re-)produced in history, society and culture?

To answer these questions, we ought to take notice of discourses other than just those of traditional rehabilitation sciences. We need encounters between disability studies and those disciplines that at first sight seem to have nothing to do with disability, such as philosophy and anthropology, history and sociology, ethnology and archaeology, literary studies and linguistics, media studies and religious studies, etc. At the same time, we have to bear in mind that doubts are also raised about such an interdisciplinary approach: What can disability studies gain by incorporating culture as an analytical tool more fully into its work? Is it truly important that disability studies meet cultural studies?

With sociology as my academic background, this discussion is familiar to me. In its founding phase at the beginning of the 20th century, sociology was originally considered one of the humanities. However, in the 1950s and 1960s as a side effect of the then dominant empirical approach that was interested primarily in quantifiable data, the issue of culture was pushed into the background in mainstream sociology. It needed the cultural change of the 1970s and the birth of cultural studies to make possible a renewed attention to culture as an analytical category essential for a comprehensive understanding of society. In short, I am arguing for an interdisciplinary approach which I believe useful and relevant for shedding new light on our contemporary societies, cultures and histories. This approach assumes that impairments and disabilities are structuring culture(s) and at the same time are structured and lived through culture. And it is not only myself who is of this opinion. For example Rosemarie Garland-Thomson was already calling for “New Disability Studies” in 2001 (see Joshua and Schillmeier 4). However, many works are still being published that apply traditional ways of thinking and more established approaches, such as the social model of disability, still remain at the centre of most scholars’ attention.

APPRECIATING AND CRITIQUING THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

Since its introduction in the late 1970s, the social model of disability has changed international disability discourses. This model, as academics and activists with a disability studies background well know, emphasizes that disability is a social construction. Basically, it implies three assumptions. First, disability is a form of social inequality and disabled persons are a minority group[1] that is discriminated against and excluded from mainstream society. Second, impairment and disability need to be distinguished and do not have a causal relation; it is not impairments *per se* which disable, but societal practices of 'disablement' which result in disability. Third, it is a society's responsibility to remove the obstacles that persons with disabilities are facing.

When this model of disability was introduced by disability rights organisations and developed further by activists and academics in parallel processes in both the United Kingdom and the United States, it offered a fundamental critique of capitalist society and a new way of thinking. However, in the course of the last 40 years this approach has somewhat become the victim of its own success. It has proven an 'all-rounder,' a useful tool for both academic discourse, disability rights activism and, last but not least, for laypersons and their identity politics. Moreover, the incorporation of its basic ideas into transnational policies, such as the UN CRPD and the two disability classifications of the World Health Organisation of 1980 and 2001, has resulted in pragmatist policies and the opinion that disability as a social problem can be 'solved' through accessibility and participation, mainstreaming and human rights policies. Especially in recent years, many interpretations have tended to ignore the revolutionary impetus of the social model and have watered it down to reformist aspirations of social inclusion and participation. Against this background, the social model seems 'a little dusty' today and it may be time to rethink or amend the concept.

In the following, I refrain from discussing merits and weaknesses of the social model at length. Instead, I will focus on the aspect of culture, which is itself a multifaceted phenomenon in need of specification. Before providing a definition, it is worth mentioning that the social model has frequently been criticised, as Katie Ellis contends, for "neglecting cultural imagery, certain personal experiences and the impacts of impairment" (3). Michael Oliver, one of the British originators of the social model, has reacted to this critique by pointing out that the model emerged directly out of the personal experiences of disabled activists and does indeed allow for the study of impairment effects. Regarding the argument that cultural representation has been neglected, however, he confirms the view of his critics as he does not consider "cultural values" to be crucial, at least as long as so many persons with disabilities are

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1 | As the British version of the social model of disability is implicitly based on the minority group theory, I cannot see a big difference compared with the US-American minority model and will for this reason not follow Goodley (Disability 11-18) in this point. There are other disability models, often established in competition to the social model, but they are also disputable. Be it the minority model or the relational model, the social policy model or the civil rights model and the human rights model, they all are more or less variants of a social science (sic!) perspective on disability.

still suffering from poverty and material deprivation (49). This assessment, although understandable in terms of practical politics, is astonishing from a sociological point of view: It clearly underestimates the role and the relevance of cultural practices in and for society and their influence on our understanding of disability. My feeling is that this lack of regard may be traced back to some shortcomings of the cultural studies approach. But before I elaborate this point, let me trace the contours of a cultural model of disability.

DRAFTING A CULTURAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

Until today, efforts to develop a cultural model of disability have been rare. However, in parallel with the development of the social model and its critical discussion and partly independent of them, the past decades have witnessed an increase in cultural studies oriented works with regard to disability and we can already identify cultural disability studies as an innovative and prolific research field carried out in the humanities. Yet, it is striking that in contrast to the social model of disability, which is characterised by strong coherence and therefore often accused of dogmatism, the field of cultural disability studies still looks more like a patchwork quilt. It has not yet found its unique contours, despite an ongoing discussion on the implications of culture for disability constructions.

As early as 1994, Tom Shakespeare called for a greater attention to cultural representations of disabled people. Inspired by feminist debates he discussed different theoretical approaches and suggested "that disabled people are 'objectified' by cultural representations" (287), under which he subsumed theatre, literature, paintings, films, and the media. In the following years, prominent scholars in the Anglo-Saxon world such as Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Robert McRuer, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, Margrit Shildrick, Tobin Siebers, Shelley Tremain, and others (for an overview, see Goodley, *Disability* 14-15) published a wide variety of cultural and literary analyses showing the value and productivity of treating "disability as a cultural trope" (Garland-Thomson 2). In 2006, Snyder and Mitchell explicitly introduced a "cultural model of disability" but they defined it narrowly as an approach that was primarily associated with US-American disability studies. In terms of content, they remained rather vague:

> "We believe the cultural model provides a fuller concept than the social model, in which 'disability' signifies only discriminatory encounters. The formulation of a cultural model allows us to theorize a political act of renaming that designates disability as a site of resistance and a source of cultural agency previously suppressed […]." (10)

In introducing the phrase “cultural locations of disability,” referring to “sites of violence, restriction, confinement, and absence of liberty for people with disabilities” (x), Snyder and Mitchell offered a tool for interdisciplinary work on disability within and beyond cultural studies. Additionally, some scholars have argued for the usefulness of a cultural model of disability to study intersections between migration, ethnicity, ‘race,’ and disability. In 2005, Patrick J. Devlieger, who teaches cultural anthropology in Leuven (Belgium), pleaded for a dialectical cultural model focussing on communication and cultural diversity, following Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Karl Marx. Recent works in postcolonial studies ask the question “how disability is figured in the global, postcolonial history of the modern” and aim “to highlight specific located examples of disability in cultural contexts” (Barker and Murray 65). Meanwhile, the cultural model of disability has also been acknowledged in religious studies as a ‘key term.’ In this context, Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper define it as an approach which analyses “how a culture’s representations and discussions of disability (and nondisability or able-bodiedness) help to articulate a range of values, ideals, or expectations that are important to that culture’s organization and identity” (35).

We can state that there is an ongoing reflection on the strengths of a cultural approach to disability. The Liverpool-based *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, which celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2016, is a witness to this lively debate. At the same time however, the respective ‘model’ still seems to have rather blurred features. Further, the debate tends to reproduce the dominance of English-speaking disability studies (see for example Goodley *Disability*) and overlooks contributions from other countries, such as the longstanding works of French philosopher Henri-Jacques Stiker. With regard to Germany, both the interdisciplinary book series “Disability Studies” published since 2007 by *transcript* and the Edinburgh German Yearbook’s fourth volume on disability in German literature, film, and theatre from 2010 attest to a great wealth of works drawing on a cultural studies approach. The editors of the yearbook, Eleoma Joshua and Michael Schillmeier, define the cultural model as “the analysis of the representations of disabled people in the cultural spaces of art, media, and literature” (5) and even speak of a “cultural turn” in disability studies (4).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss these different proposals extensively. Instead I will, in what follows, explain my own approach. Based on contributions published in 2005 and 2012, the latter together with Werner Schneider, I develop a cultural model of disability for the purpose of providing a joint framework for the already numerous contributions which analyse disability with the help of methodologies and approaches originating from cultural studies. My intention is not to suggest that a cultural model should replace the social model of disability. Rather, critical disability studies should acknowledge that disability is *both* socially and culturally constructed (on this point, see also Ellis 2).

THE CULTURAL MODEL OF DISABILITY AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL

What is the core of a cultural model of disability? My starting point is that such a model needs to reflect first of all its own understanding of culture. As both a social practice and an analytical category, culture not only implies cultural activities in the narrow sense, be it so-called high culture or popular culture. Instead, for innovative research it is much more productive to apply a broad conception of culture that denotes the totality of 'things' created and employed by a particular people or a society, be they material or immaterial: objects and instruments, institutions and organisations, ideas and knowledge, symbols and values, meanings and interpretations, narratives and histories, traditions, rituals and customs, social behaviour, attitudes and identities (see Moebius 7-9; Schneider and Waldschmidt 146).

In my opinion, if we were to use such a general understanding of culture, a cultural model of disability would not be dismissed as focalising only symbols and meanings, but could broaden our analytical perspective to investigate the relations between symbolic (knowledge) systems, categorization and institutionalisation processes, material artefacts, practices and 'ways of doing things,' and their consequences for persons with *and* without disabilities, their social positions, relations and ways of subjectivation. Such a cultural disability model thus differs from other approaches in important aspects: It considers disability neither as only an individual fate, as in the individualistic-reductionist model of disability, nor as merely an effect of discrimination and exclusion, as in the social model. Rather, this model questions the other side of the coin, the commonly unchallenged 'normality,' and investigates how practices of (de-) normalization result in the social category we have come to call 'disability.' As a consequence of this shift in focus, four programmatic ideas arise.

First, a cultural model of disability should regard neither disability nor impairment as clear-cut categories of pathological classification that automatically, in the form of a causal link, result in social discrimination. Rather, this model considers impairment, disability *and* normality as effects generated by academic knowledge, mass media, and everyday discourses. These terms are 'empty signifiers' or blurred concepts referring to a mixture of different physical, psychological and cognitive features that have nothing in common other than negative or, as in the case of ability and normality, positive attributions from society. In any culture at any given moment these classifications are dependent on power structures and the historical situation; they are contingent upon and determined by hegemonic discourses. In short, the cultural model considers disability not as a given entity or fact, but describes it as a discourse or as a process, experience, situation, or event.

Second, from this premise arises the notion that disability does not denote an individual's feature, but an always embodied category of differentiation. Disability is taken as 'true' because it is not a natural fact but a naturalized difference. It is ascribed to the evidence of physical or embodied expression (even in the case of not directly observable alterities), and it is interpreted within a dichotomous framework of bodily differences: healthy, complete, and normal versus diseased, deficient, and deviating. It exists only when and insofar as certain (bodily and embodied) differences can be distinguished and thought of as 'relevant for health' within a given cultural and historical order of knowledge.

Third, both disability and ability relate to prevailing symbolic orders and institutional practices of producing normality and deviance, the self and the other, familiarity and alterity. By assuming a constructivist and discursive character of disability, the historical contingency and cultural relativity of inclusion and exclusion, stigmatization and recognition can come into consideration, as well as socio-cultural patterns of experience and identity, meaning-making and practice, power and resistance. Furthermore, from this perspective disability is connected to specific social imperatives addressing all relevant parties, on the one hand the experts for support and the rehabilitation business, and on the other hand the laypersons, whether able-bodied or disabled, with their desire or their defiance to adapt and comply to socio-cultural normative expectations. Thus, a cultural model of disability shows that the individual and collective subjectivities of 'disabled' and 'nondisabled' persons are interdependent.

Fourth, when one employs such a 'de-centring' approach, surprising new insights become possible, insights into our late modern societies, their trajectories and processes of change. Instead of continuing to only 'stare' at persons with disabilities, asking what kind of problems they are confronted with and how society should support them, the focus can widen to a look at society and culture in general, aiming to understand the dominant ways of problematizing issues of health, normality, and functioning; how knowledge of the body is produced, transformed and mediated; which and how normalities and deviations are constructed; how exclusionary and including practices in everyday life are designed by different institutions; how identities and new forms of subjectivity are created and shaped.

In sum, the cultural model of disability implies a fundamental change of epistemological perspective since it does not deal with the margin but rather with the 'centre' of society and culture. As a consequence, it changes disability studies into 'dis/ability studies' (for this approach see also Goodley *Dis/ability*). The introduction of the slash indicates that one should no longer problematize just the category of disability, but rather the interplay between 'normality' and 'disability.' In short, the transversal and intersectional should become the actual object of research. Dis/ability understood as a contingent, always 'embodied' type of difference relating to the realms of health, functioning, achievement and beauty (and their negative poles), offers essential knowledge about the legacies, trajectories, turning points, and transformations of contemporary society and culture.

CONCLUSION

This essay has discussed the relevance of culture as an analytical category for the study of disability. It has attempted to show that a cultural model of disability has emerged over the last two decades, cross-cutting different academic disciplines and transnational with regard to languages and contexts. Of course, bringing disability and culture together does not progress smoothly; it involves "contact zones," i.e., "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power [...]" (Pratt 34). This volume offers these conflictual yet productive spaces through which new ways of seeing and thinking can emerge. Let me finish my contribution citing Davis again: "[W]hile most 'normals' [and academics] think they understand the issue of disability" and can "speak with knowledge on the subject," we need to commence from the assumption that "in fact [we] do not" (Davis xvi). The belief that one is lacking knowledge seems a good point of departure for new journeys into the worlds of dis/ability.

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