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At the time of writing, it is a bitter time for Disabled people and issues in the UK, as well as elsewhere. As the Centre for Welfare Reform’s 2014 report ‘Counting the Cuts’, published on behalf of the Campaign for a Fair Society, calculates it, ‘Disabled people in poverty bear a burden [of cuts] which is more than four times the (modal) average.’ The stark pressures of this situation demand responses and action. This volume sets out to rethink definitions and approaches to Disability, as well as, conversely, to reconsider how thinking about Disability has a bearing in turn on every other field of endeavour, often in perhaps unexpected ways. It may seem a luxury – even an indulgence – to engage in more thinking-on-paper when the realities are at present so pressing and difficult. Moreover, the approaches of this volume engage with complex questions in complex ways that may not seem immediately or obviously pertinent to a resistance to economic, social and cultural discrimination and deprivation. Yet alongside direct social and political protest and action it nevertheless remains important to engage with ongoing reflections on how theory and practice are never separate. An assumed opposition, or even antagonism, between theory and practice overlooks that all practices carry their theoretical shapings and drives within themselves, wittingly or unwittingly. This can entail that practices may have unanticipated outcomes, side-effects or implications. In ranging across a wide variety of fields and issues, some of which may seem to relate obviously to Disability and some of which may not, this volume sets out to explore how thinking about Disability is inhabited by a range of assumptions – essentialisms – that shape the arguments and actions that are invoked in relation to it. At the same time, the volume also sets out to read ideas of Disability and their implications in areas and issues where they may not have been thought to reside before.
The chapters in this collection, then, share the aim of challenging essentialism and its implications. To do so, they engage with a wide range of materials from literary, social, medical and historical texts to film and painting. The reason for using such a range of materials is not to turn away from or disregard reality by focusing merely on representations, but precisely to explore what happens when claims are made about Disability without assuming from the start that there are known, inherent differences in such materials. To put it differently, the assumption that materials differ inherently in terms of their relation (or not) to ‘reality’ is itself part of the essentialism that this collection sets out to challenge: the assumption that texts and/as language have a merely reflective, secondary relationship to a primary, concrete and material reality is what the chapters in this collection all take issue with and work through in terms of its myriad consequences. As critical psychologist Jan de Vos notes, ‘[t]his quest for the real and the authentic is furthermore the key of many mainstream psycho-social action programmes as these often come in terms of repairing the social fabric, or, the creation of spaces of dialogue and encounter’. On the other hand, the thinking in this volume also does not, therefore, assume that literary texts or artistic objects have some kind of superior value to the real in learning about meanings and identities: the idea that art or literature are not ‘merely’ reflective of reality but an enriched, concentrated or heightened version of it are for this volume two sides of the same coin. I should stress that this position is emphatically not understood as some kind of ‘relativism’ here. Indeed, this collection’s contributors see relativism as itself also relying on a position which assumes that there is a real or truth from which it can derive itself: relativism is, paradoxically, not relativist, in other words. The interest and focus of this volume, then, is to read how meanings about and around Disability are claimed in a variety of discourses and how these meanings play out in their implications also across discourses, some of which may initially seem to be disconnected or irrelevant to one another.

Disability Studies have burgeoned in the past thirty years. As with many areas of study rooted originally in political rights movements there have been parallel shifts to those in, for instance, ethnic, gender and sexual identity studies from initial struggles for basic recognition, support and access to the formulation of equal rights and both retrospective and prospective theoretical perspectives. The emergence of theoretical explorations in relation to Disability has, as in the other areas mentioned too, been seen as both an affront to the pressing problems and difficulties in the realm of practice and the ‘real world’ as well
as a means precisely of uprooting disempowering, taken-for-granted assumptions in both theory and practice. The work of researchers such as Carol Thomas and Dan Goodley and Griet Roets, for instance, has argued for ‘exposing the interdisciplinary characters of disability studies and gender studies’ as a means of ‘displaying the way culture constructs subject positions that we then assume to be pre-given, universal and unchanging’. However, such arguments about ‘subjectivisation’ can already be found in much earlier critiques from critical psychology, such as those of Julian Henriques, Wendy Hollway, Cathy Urwin, Couze Venn and Valerie Walkerdine, in their classic book Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity, where they argue that

Discourses rooted in the notion of a unitary, rational subject still predominate in the social sciences in spite of critiques which have shown such a concept to be untenable. [...] It survives not so much in explicit defences of the model as in the implicit assumptions of various dualisms: social and cognitive, content and process, the intentionality of agents and determination by structures, the subject as constituted or constitutive. [...] we [...] wanted to break with the tendency of psychology’s research to reproduce and naturalize the particular rationalist notion of the subject.

This questioning of a taken-for-granted subject that is consistent, coherent and singular implies a questioning also of its attendant attributes, including still widely used concepts such as ‘voice’, ‘agency’ and ‘the body’. For, as Carolyn Steedman, Cathy Urwin, and Valerie Walkerdine further explain, in their like-minded volume Language, Gender and Childhood:

[our] approach requires a form of analysis which does not simply point to the existence of either alternative forms of language or lacu-nae of silence as expressions of social inequality. Rather, it demands that we understand the possibilities for change by examining how forms of speaking and forms of truth have been produced, and how these regulate and circumscribe what can be said about what, when and where. In this process, we are also forced to re-analyse what constitutes subversion and resistance, and how the subjective and the political intersect.

In other words, ideas about Disability being ‘represented’ through such concepts as ‘voice’, ‘agency’ or ‘the body’ rely on ideas of who ‘sees’ or
'hears' whom, and how and why. Lynn Morgan, for instance, refers to Monica Casper's work to argue also that 'agency is not an already existing fact (ontological or otherwise) to be discovered or revealed but is rather a social project'. Such questionings, then, have major implications for a neo-liberal politics that relies on and demands a transparent subject who can speak – have a 'voice' – and act – has ‘agency’ – on behalf of itself and its body and consciousness. As dis/ability theorist Dan Goodley has recently also asked, 'How can [...] what we might loosely define as the disability field address the contemporary concerns facing disabled and non-disabled people in a time of austerity?' It can be seen to be not at all coincidental that our volume draws on such critiques as those of Henries et al. when in the 1998 republication of Changing the Subject they describe the 1984 conditions of the publication of the original edition as being when 'the New Right had come to power in Britain, and an ideology which has come to be described as neo-liberalism, supported by powerful institutions like the World Bank, was about to change the political landscapes across the globe'.

Assumptions about voice, vision, the body, consciousness and agency, then, are of central interest to the contributors to this collection. The chapter by Catrin Edwards, for instance, closely examines the terms of a debate in the realm of psychoanalytic therapeutic practice to analyse claims about whether and how ‘madness’ is seen to speak itself. Hannah Anglin-Jaffe considers closely related issues in comparing post-colonial critiques of oppressions of identity and language to critiques of oppression of d/Deaf identities and language, while Helen Santa Maria's chapter considers diagnoses and definitions of autism in readings of Herman Melville's short story 'Bartleby the Scrivener', often invoked in Autism Studies as a paradigmatic portrayal of autism avant la lettre. YuKuan Chen's work analyses the way a painting, Jacob Lawrence's Blind Beggars, is considered in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's book Staring in order to rethink both wider issues around how Disability is looked-at and how 'looking' and 'vision' are seen to work at all, while Neil Cocks's chapter analyses related ideas of seeing and looking in relation specifically to film theory and its implications for Disability. Simon Bailey, meanwhile, in his chapter explores how claims are made about ADHD' s supposed 'realities' and 'myths', and as part of his exploration also critiques how brain images are looked-at. Several chapters directly consider definitions of 'the body' in relation to Disability: in the chapter by Louise Tondeur, for instance, on hirsutism as Disability in women, by Sue Walsh in considering Animal Studies' relationship with Disability Studies and by Ute Kalender in thinking about reproduction.
Notes

3. For discussions of the historical development and definitions and aims of the field see, for instance, C. Thomas, Sociologies of Disability and Illness: Contested Ideas in Disability Studies and Medical Sociology (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007) and D. Goodley, Disability Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Introduction (London: Sage, 2011).
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