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On the matter of bodies: Mapping the terrain

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I have sometimes thought that if one wanted to discover a scholar's secret knot of a heart, what you have to do is examine what he, or she, 'works on.' Held up to the light, more than one academic inquiry might suggest a source of pathology, a hint of personal terror...¹

My final prayer: make me always a man [sic] who asks questions²

The cartographic vocabulary

Cartography is the science, *and* art, of map making. This is relevant to this exegesis insofar as it attempts to remap a limited area of disability studies; namely, the disability/impairment distinction central to the social model of disability. Both theorisation and cartography consist of a series of steps that produce a visual or tactile (in the case of Braille) and intelligible rendering of a real or imaginary space. Cartographical terminology is therefore useful in organizing the material of this thesis. It will be used as an aid (prosthetic?) in synthesising its arguments into something concise, instructive, and, hopefully, useful to others who might want to explore the terrain of disability. Cartography, to an extent, produces what it subsequently represents. Judith Butler argues, "... the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended." What this means for map making – whether theoretical or cartographical – is that the subject/s of such mapping must first fulfill the criteria of the map-maker in order to be represented on or by the map. Thus mapping is always a "further formation" of what it 'represents'³.

Topography of the theoretical landscape

The status of body, or the 'body,' is the fault line along which disability theory is cleft. Due to the political ramifications of removing those scare quotes and acknowledging a material body filled with agency, debates about the status of

body, the presence or absence of scare quotes notwithstanding, rock the foundations of the discipline as well as the lives of those whom it theorizes. Until recently, the material body had “fallen on hard times”⁴. This may have something to do with the taint of the biological body’s assumed association with modernism⁵. It is as though, by placing the body within quotation marks we render it safe to discuss since we are no longer discussing something biological. In any case, feminists, amongst others, have significantly contributed to the orthodoxy that renders the body sans quote marks a heresy to broach in particular academic spheres. I am reminded of Vicki Kirby’s⁶ anecdote about asking a question at a conference which made her conviction in the ontological body evident. When she asked which body the speaker was referring to, she, the speaker, pinched herself whilst replying, “Well, I certainly don’t mean *this* body.” Kirby notes that, “...this abode recalls a body that demonstrates its anti-essentialism by pinching its essentialism, a body that denies the violence of identity on the one hand by violently grasping its identity with the other”⁷.

This suspicion of the material body is particularly evident in the field of disability studies. Whether mapped from within a ‘traditional’ (i.e. medical) or ‘critical’ (i.e. social model) paradigm, disability theory, to say nothing of experience, remains hinged on the matter of bodies or whether or not they are festooned with pejorative adjectives and patronized by the use of quotation marks. The cartographies of disability may diverge on the question of how to represent the body – as prior to its linguistic and social construction (i.e. ‘biological’?) or the effect of such construction (i.e. ‘cultural’?), or, as Sally French suggests, “something in-between”⁸. However, in the end, we map makers must accept the existence of a body, material or otherwise, in order to go engage in such violent arguments about causality. The point of commensurability between what can broadly be subsumed under the monikers ‘medical’ and ‘social’ models is precisely this: the body.

The rejection of the material body as salient to disability is predicated on a notion of the biological that belongs to, and is in the interests of, patriarchy. If the historicity of nature/biology/materiality can be convincingly argued as determined by patriarchal interests, and if such a historicity can be re-mapped,

then the need amongst scholars and activists to reject such concepts on the basis that they justify oppression falls away. Indeed, the digging in of the heels so characteristic of constructivist body theory becomes part of that oppression insofar as it ratifies notions of materiality that are by no means above contestation. It is along this treacherous fault line that I wander. But first the map must be completed; the terrain is too slippery to venture into without a guide of some sort.

Zenith telescopes: devices through which to see disability differently

Like most theories, the social model of disability was developed in reaction to its predecessor. That predecessor is the medical model. The following is a brief catalogue of its central tenets: “A deviancy will be placed within the medical model if it is seen as (a) non-voluntary and (b) organic, if (c) the class of relevant, technically-competent experts are physicians, and if (d) it falls below some socially defined minimal standard of acceptability”⁹. The assumptions of this model – some implicit, one might even say embodied, others explicitly acknowledged – are the following: (a) disability is a deviance, (b) that the standard of acceptability below which it must fall in order to qualify as such is the same for the author as it is for the reader (in other words, the standard is not subject to change across time and cultural locations; it is *a priori* standard), (c) that those qualified to nominalise X as a disability are physicians (which is problematic on many level just one of which is that it hands over exclusive power to the same people who are vested in maintaining the definition in the first place), (d) that disability is denned exclusively in biology (it is “organic”). Amongst the salient political implications of this is that it allows for a mapping of disability in which the connectivity of agency of human communities on the one hand, and the co-ordinates of the exclusions experienced by disabled people on the other, remain un-plotted and invisible. Put another way, it becomes the foundation upon which society may abdicate any responsibility for causing disability on the basis that the phenomena and all the exclusions it occasions flow from a ‘deficient’ predetermined biological body. This kind of logic can best be summed up as “blaming the victim.” It is also fairly typical of the justificatory arsenal of social oppression.

The social model is designed to provide very convincing, empowering, and politically mobilising arguments to the contrary. To achieve this, the model maps disability in a manner which is ‘accurate’ to the contours of the lived experience of many disabled people. In essence, it distinguishes between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability.’ ‘Impairment’ is understood as a biological accomplishment while ‘disability’ is a socio- political accomplishment¹⁰. Carrol Thomas & Marian Corker propose a related and expanded formulation: “[D]isability is the active and purposive social exclusion and disadvantaging of people with impairment, as opposed to a biologically determined phenomenon”¹¹. Thus, for strict adherents of this model, changing the normative arrangements by which society is organised for the ‘able’ -bodied can eliminate disability. Amongst the political stakes are the ability to speak of disability in ways which do not hold the impaired responsible for their oppression, to speak of it in ways which do hold society accountable when and where it disables the impaired, and which do not reduce the experience of impairment to tragedy. The built environment is a fruitful source of examples in this regard¹². Amongst other things, the construction of the built environment generally reflects the injunction that in order for representation to be extended, particularly in the form of access, you had better not be ‘mobility-impaired’; you had better have legs and they had better walk (to say nothing of eyes that can see and ears that can hear and so on). In the same way that Adrienne Rich¹³ argued that heterosexuality is compulsory in a patriarchy, a certain kind of mobility constructed as ‘able’ seems compulsory too.

However, as I have intimated, there is a cost. This model discloses disability in such a way as to render the material body as agentic in the construction of this experience, impotent, and any discussion of its agency as a form of ideologically oppressive heresy. It does not ignore the matter of bodies so much as it represents such matter as immaterial to disability. This has become something of orthodoxy both within disability studies and certain varieties of social constructivism across disciplines.

Just as the social model can be defined to some extent as a reaction to the medical model, material feminism can be defined as a reaction to social

constructivism (of which the medical model is in *some ways* exemplary) Although it is no more monolithic an entity than social constructivism, certain arguments and values are common to most of its proponents and, like all theory, it comes with “first principles.” Firstly, although material feminism recognizes that language and culture can and do construct reality it rejects the idea that materiality is the passive site upon which these constructions are built or upon which culture and language inscribe themselves¹⁴. A material feminist would argue that there is no *a priori* reason why activeness, agency, and creative dynamism are only descriptive of language and culture. A material feminist would also point out that this image of nature/ materiality/body as stasis, lack, passivity, the mirror which reflect agentic cultural constructions, a predetermined ‘thing’, a mystical writing pad upon which language leaves its mark but which cannot itself contribute to the shape or character or consequences of this trace or to the shape or character of the tool that inscribes such a mark, is empirically untenable, politically egregious, and just all out wrong. Further more, it has an eerie resonance with patriarchal constructions of women as the shadow of the active agentic man. This model is unapologetic in its commitment to fact that “nonhuman entities have both agency and ontology”¹⁵. As to the matter of bodies, it follows then, that the material feminist answers yes to the question “Are there bodies really?” (A reformulation of de Beauvoir’s celebrated question “Are there women really?”)¹⁶

For material feminism, the body is not something that, as Tobin Siebers puts it, “exists apart from social forces or...represents something more real, natural, or authentic than things of culture,”¹⁷ however the body *is* “a biological agent teeming with vital and often chaotic forces. It is not inert matter subject to easy manipulation by social representations. The body is alive, which means that it is as capable of influencing and transforming social languages as they are capable of influencing and transforming it.” That is the best summation of a materialist feminist position in relation to the matter of material bodies that I know of and it is the one with which I shall work in the course of what follows.

“THESE BLUNT CRUDE REALITIES”: Not exactly sexy

To put it bluntly-because this need is blunt as it gets-we must have our asses cleaned after we shit and pee. Or we have others' fingers inserted into our rectums to assist shitting. Or we have tubes of plastic inserted inside us to assist peeing or we have re-routed anuses and pissers so we do it all into bags attached to our bodies. These blunt, crude realities. Our daily lives

- C.M. Wade, *It Ain't Exactly Sexy*

Remapping the matter

My criticism of the social model is simple: the iron-clad distinction between impairment and disability is ontologically and empirically untenable¹⁸. In the context of the latest South African scholarship on disability this distinction seems to remain a relatively untroubled orthodoxy amongst academics working in the field¹⁹. There are excellent reasons for this which I will get to a little further on in the chapter. I am of course not the first to point this out. However, what is ‘original’ about my project is that, to the best of my knowledge, this distinction has not been disaggregated using the resources of material feminism. Many material feminist critiques have been offered to address the weak points in body theory, constructivist, social modelist and others, that are sustained by such a distinction, and surely some address the social model itself, but I cannot think of any that use the specific tools created by Karen Barad in her trail blazing article *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter*,²⁰ to unpick the impairment/disability knot.

Barad’s²¹ own work identifies this vista of unmapped theoretical terrain. With the exception of Judith Butler’s²² offerings, post-structuralism has not, to date, offered a convincing account of how matter comes to matter. It has instructed us very fruitfully on how language, discourse, and culture come to matter; it has certainly theorized how bodies as linguistic and social constructions come to matter; but matter itself skulks about in the disgraced space of the family closet. Our failure to theorise the mattering process of matter has appreciably disabled body theory and contributed to silencing those amongst us whose disabilities, or aspects of our disabilities, are so deeply physically engendered that the urge to scream in the face of this failure is one which we (perhaps I should only speak only on my own behalf) barely manage to suppress; it festers in a shallow grave

just beneath the surface of our skins. Barad's²³ contribution, which will be put to work in this chapter in the disaggregation of disability/impairment, has been to provide a highly detailed rendering of matter's mattering, agentic qualities, and what they mean for how we conceive of our ontologies.

Firstly, Barad²⁴, drawing on Niels Bohr, rejects the idea that "things" have "inherently determinate boundaries or properties." What does this mean for the impairment/disability distinction? If the 'thing' impairment and the 'thing' disability share a boundary and if that boundary is not determinate – that is, is not clear, is a grey area, or an area where the two bleed into one another making it unclear where one ends and the other begins – then it becomes challenging to attribute disability part and parcel to cultural practices of disablement. Obviously there will be pockets of strong typicalities (such as the built environment) and in these the distinction will hold and be useful, however, in terms of the ontology of disability the same cannot be said.

If I speak of my experience of disability as, say, a paraplegic, it is very difficult to claim that disability has its ontology purely 'in' or by dint of culture OR nature/matter. Matter and culture do not have a determinate boundary. What this means for explaining the mattering process of matter is that we cannot cordon off certain descriptive terms such as active, creative, language bearing etc and attribute them solely to nature or culture. Think for example of national boundaries, say the one between France and Germany, around which it is impossible to determine when German ends and French begins. There is an area between what is strongly typical of French and what is strongly typical of German in which both take on each other's characteristics. Might the same not be said of disability and impairment, nature and culture? They are – and I find this extremely annoying because it reeks of the solipsism of new age philosophies – both different and the same.

This is what Barad²⁵ is referring to when she theorizes that, "*phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting "components"*" (italics in the original); reality, such as the reality of disability, "is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena, but of "things"-in-phenomena"²⁶ This

is all very esoteric but can it be explicated using ‘simple’ examples and plain language? I believe the answer to be yes.

Assuming that I am correct in my assessment of the above distinction as being both at the heart of social modelism and as being ontologically untenable because empirical observation does not support it, then the work of this chapter will consist in justifying this claim but also in explicating a *possible* alternative. I will therefore argue that disability is neither the pure effect of oppressive socio-cultural activities and choices nor the pure effect of biological activities and foreclosures. What I will suggest is that we start looking at disability as intra-actively accomplished, the ‘product’ or ‘effect’ of the intra-action ‘between’ nature and culture. Somewhat tangentially, I am also going to suggest that the social model’s rejection of the biological body as salient to disability is predicated on an understanding of biology that is based on patriarchal mores. Finally, I will suggest that there is a fruitful distinction to be made between *having* a disability and *being* disabled, although I shall not be hoist upon my own petard by suggesting that each is the exclusively product of either nature or culture.

Whatever motivates disability theory’s relatively wholesale retreat from bodies (particularly amongst South African disciples), it is beyond doubt that this model has been enormously productive in the struggle for disability rights, has earned its political purchase, and is vital in the South African context for securing parity and dignity for disabled people. This notwithstanding, as responsible critics, we have a duty not to participate in its ossification or impoverishment by rendering it a ‘holy cow’ above intellectual deconstruction. So, cognoscente of the need to be respectful of its very significant merits, I am going to proceed to critique it. With caution.

The premier definition of disability as a social accomplishment was first articulated by the authors of the social model – the Union of Impaired People Against Segregation (UPIAS). According to UPIAS:

In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in

society²⁷.

Tom Shakespeare²⁸, Marian Corker & Carrol Thomas²⁹, and Sally French³⁰ amongst others, have all voiced considerable and informed dissatisfaction with this distinction. Shakespeare³¹ is particularly sharp in identifying that

After thirty years of writing about the social model and applying the social model, it is hard to deny that the social model provides a theoretical system or paradigm, however much this label is abjured. Above all, it hardly matters whether the social model is a system, model, paradigm, idea, definition or even tool. What matters is that the social model is wrong.

So, what *is* wrong with the social model and how might material feminism address this?

Some data in support of the mapmaker's disclosures

Firstly, the creative work and experiences of Nancy Mairs³² and Cheryl Marie Wade Mairs³³ bears witness to the fact that there are features of certain impairments which are inherently disabling. For example, by pointing out all of the things that she cannot do – such as sit up in bed unaided or take an unassisted step or dress herself – Mairs³⁴ identifies features of impairment which are in fact disabling. Mairs (ibid) also points out that “In truth, although I am severely crippled, I am hardly disabled at all, since, thanks to technology and my relatively *advantaged circumstances*, I’m not prevented from engaging in meaningful activity”³⁵ For Wade³⁶ her impairment as a paraplegic is disabling insofar as it occasions a lack of privacy similar to that experienced by an infant but through the intellectual lens of an adult consciousness. The need that Wade³⁷ describes to have a finger inserted up her anus to “assist shitting” is quite obviously neither caused by social arrangements, cultural constructions, and or the agencies of either. Simply put, she must have someone’s finger stuck up her ass because of the physical limitations inveighed by her impairment. Thus Wade and Mairs contributions trouble the idea of a determinate boundary between impairment and disability pointing to that “something in between” that Sally French refers to³⁸.

Just exactly what is going on here? If the social model depends on the integrity of the distinction disability/impairment, then these empirical data cannot be

ignored. What they indicate is that that the line or determinate boundary between biological impairment and social disablement is – however politically practical – false. At best it could be described as a line traced in quicksand. The social model, in holding on to this distinction, theorizes “the human as either pure cause or pure effect...”³⁹

And then there is pain, that most treacherous of terrains for theorists. How to speak of it, acknowledge its bodily reality, without multiplying the harm that it can and often does do? How not to exoticize it? How not to make of it a gratuitous sexual fetish? And who has the right to write its reality? In the context of disability, perhaps only those who experience it can claim such a ‘right.’ Tobin Siebers, amongst those in whom pain materializes, writes,

I stress the importance of pain not because pain and disability are synonymous but to offer a challenge to current body theory and to expose to what extent its dependence on social constructionism collaborates with the misrepresentation of the disabled body in the political sphere.”⁴⁰

Like Siebers,⁴¹ I am not referring pain engendered by social oppression, for example, the pain occasioned by heteronormativity, or racialization etc, although to be clear I take such pain as just as real as pain caused by any other mechanism. Clearly, such pain is caused by the refusal of the able-bodied to include and accept people with disabilities as “part of the human community”⁴².

And yet, as Siebers points out,

most people with a disability understand that physical pain is an enemy. It hovers over innumerable daily actions, whether the disability is painful in itself or only the occasion for pain because of the difficulty of navigating one's environment...Some theorists have gone so far as to argue that pain remaps the body's erotic sites, redistributing the erogenous zones, breaking up the monopoly of the genitals, and smashing the repressive and aggressive edifice of the ego. Rare is the theoretical account where physical suffering remains harmful for very long⁴³.

The additional pain of the “dangerous supplement” – with apologies to Derrida – the glass eye that scratches and infects, or the prosthetic limb that rubs raw the stump it fastens to is no more romantic or desired than the pain of having that finger, the one about which Wade⁴⁴ writes of so eloquently– stuck up ones anus. My own experience of pain has also been instructive: it is pain that sometimes

means taking a pay-taxi to University when I find the three block walk to the shuttle stop impossible, not because I am ‘sad’ but because I have not enough energy to walk those three extra blocks, because pushing through can and has caused episodes of exhaustion that can send me to bed for the rest of the week. Most significantly I take that taxi, which is an ill-afforded necessity, because I have learned that I must conserve every drop of energy in order to keep up the required pretence that I am fine, okay, not in significant pain, not in pain at all, and certainly not subsumed in depression over my head, as soon as I enter the company of others. Because in the end my pain is not even ‘real’ – it cannot be turned into a fetish, or something freaky and politically subversive; it does not come with a cane or an ear-trumpet. It is mute. It is expected to hold its peace. It is not “as bad as X.” The conceptual *apartheid* sustained by the impairment/disability distinction makes it very difficult, and often re-traumatising, to give that pain, that lack of privacy, that restriction on doing and being that such harms incorporate, voice. If I could select just one reason to re-fit the social model, this would be it. We collaborate in the subjugation of disabled people by subscribing to a model that inherently denies the personal character of some of disability by dismissing those accounts of suffering not attributable to disabling social practices⁴⁵ by rendering their expression heretical. If an acknowledgement of bodily pain as harm (when and where it is such) disaggregates the social model’s central distinction then it is a price that we must pay. Not to do so would be an egregious exercise in political correctness. Personally, I don’t think the prize worth the price.

I started by arguing that a) the impairment/disability distinction is empirically untenable and that disability is neither the exclusive effect of nature nor the exclusive effect of cultural practices. In concluding I want to pose the following question and posit a *possible* answer. The distinction upon which the social model rests is the product of a rigid and equally ‘inaccurate’ opposition between nature/culture which subordinates the nature on the basis that it is passive and determined by the superior term, culture, which is active and creative. How like the construction of the ‘inherent’ nature of men and women! My question is, on what basis and with what consequences have we rejected nature? And, as a

corollary, dismissed all those who posit nature as agentic and creative and an important ‘part’ of causality as racist, or sexist, or colonialist, oppressors? Certainly there are appeals to nature which are just that but I know of know *a priori* reason to construct all appeals to the agency of nature as racist, sexist etc. Why this is relevant here is that the othering of nature has consequences for disabled people.

For feminist and materialist theorist of science, Donna J. Haraway, Nature is,

one of those impossible things characterized during a talk in 1989 in California by Gayatri Spivak as that which we cannot desire. Excruciatingly conscious of nature’s constitution as Other in the histories of colonialism, racism, sexism and class domination of many kinds, many people who have been ground to powder and formed in European and Euro-American crucibles nonetheless find this problematic, ethno-specific, long-lived, and globally mobile concept something we *cannot do without* but can never “have”⁴⁶.

What Haraway is pointing to – as I understand it – is just how untenable this subalternization of nature is; untenable because we tend to distance ourselves from nature, constitute it as the Other, on the basis of a version of what nature really is that has been constructed by patriarchy in the service of its own interests, interests which are colonial, racist, misogynistic, and enslaving. If we distance ourselves from nature on a patriarchal definition of what nature is – primordial, a site of predetermination and essences, fixed – then we are, in a very material way, ratifying that definition. We are saying yes to a construction of nature that has no *a priori* claim to truth.

It may be pointed out, and this is a fair criticism even though I believe it is predicated on a misapprehension, that in suggesting that this patriarchal version of nature is false, I am also suggesting that there is some true, timeless, and apolitical conception of nature to which we might, at least on the theoretical level, have access. In addition, I could easily be construed as arguing that the patriarchal definitions of what nature is are a construction, but that the material feminist definitions are not. To the first I respond that the project of material feminism is precisely the contestation of timeless, unsituated, apolitical notion of nature but at the same time it is not a notion of Nature that says no to the agency of nature or to nature’s reality as something to which we only have access

through language, which language can act upon but which cannot act upon language, and which finds its reality only in and through language. To the second, yes, indeed material feminists are (re)constructing nature however we do not accept that all constructions of nature are equally valid on the following basis: constructions have material consequences and although we may not ultimately be able to judge between them according to whether they are true or false we can and must judge between them according to what material consequences they effect. The alternative is cultural relativism and it is not, in my assessment, ethical. Hekman⁴⁷ argues that disclosure on an intransitive definition – “to show itself, to come to light” – is what needs to be interrogated when choosing between constructions. That is to say, we are not trying to get to reality as such, even though we accept that there is a level on which reality is independent of our conceptions of it, but rather we are trying to get at what different disclosures of reality bring to light⁴⁸ According to Hekman “it is possible to compare the consequences of different disclosures of the same reality”⁴⁹.

I wish to apply this idea to the way in which the impairment/disability distinction discloses reality. The distinction is necessary and helpful but only in a stipulated sense – that is to say, context is what makes it a remedy or a poison. I think if I may be so bold as to say so, that this has universal application. There is nothing of our realities and theorizations of those realities that is only or always true or false, only or always remedy or poison, but context makes it so. What this allows for is a “radically open future”⁵⁰. It allows us to make use of anything and everything, as feminists, from Darwinism to Butlerian constructivism, in the service of making disclosures that render the world a little more just, modestly more peaceful, and so on. With this in mind I suggest that we hang on to the disability/impairment distinction with one proviso and the addition of a second distinction: firstly, let us use it only when the reality it discloses has wholesome material consequences for being. For example, it is a strong argument for social structures and decision makers within them to stop building the environment in disabling ways and to take responsibility for doing so when and where they do. Secondly, I propose that we allow for a distinction between being disabled by

our bodies (having a disability) and being disabled by the communities in which we live, that way we can address the ontology of disability in ways which do not contribute to further disablement by shutting down certain representations of that reality that disabled people may wish and need to make.

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION: Disability, rape, and the non-negotiability of ‘credibility.’

The domains of political and linguistic “representation” set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended.⁵¹

Connectivity-mapping; or, mapping connectively

At this I want to make a connection between the problems of representation that face rape survivors and the problems of representation that face people with disabilities. I will try to support the following claim: both survivors of rape and people with ‘invisible’ disabilities face the difficulty of telling their stories in ways which are ‘plausible’ and ‘credible.’ In the case of disability the rigidity of the disability/impairment distinction is causally implicated in the creation of this problem of representation. Butler⁵² illustrates this problem very accurately in claiming that for representation to be extended, conferring the status of viable subjecthood, one must give an account of oneself that meets pre-existing criteria and that, therefore, these criteria, denned in language and culture, form the subject that they claim to only to represent. The difficulty with the disability/impairment distinction is exactly that, *as a rigid distinction*, it sets rules about what representations of disability confer subjecthood as a disabled person. Such recognition is prerequisite to securing certain rights that the able-bodied take for granted. So, someone like Cheryl Marie Wade fails to materialize as a subject, in this context, because her representation of her disability, as one which attributes the disablement in part to the agency and limitations to agency that her body engenders, fails to play by the rules. If ethics can be conceived of as ability, a response-ability (meaning the ability to respond to realities outside of one’s own personal experience), then how is it ethical to respond to such a representation negatively? How is it ethical to constrain and/or close down

certain representations of disability on the basis of a distinction which, not to mince words, is wrong? Does this not point to an ethical failure to respond to the difficulties of others as they are experienced by others?

Applying to the work of Jane Foress Bennet⁵³ and Judith Butler⁵⁴ I argue that certain disabilities, or to be sensible, certain disabled people, face alarmingly similar problems to those faced by rape survivors in terms of establishing ‘plausibility’ and ‘credibility’ for the narrative ‘I’ in their representations of their experiences. Because ‘credibility’ is non-negotiable if what is sought is a remedy for injustice or the securing of basic rights this has very material implications both for rape survivors and for people with disabilities. In other words, if I cannot establish the story of my disability as plausible and myself within that as credible beyond reasonable doubt, or at least on a balance of probabilities depending on whom I am telling my story to, then I will not be able to secure some of the basic rights and remedies for injustice that able bodied people take for granted.

But first, some points of clarification: what do we mean by ‘plausibility’ and ‘credibility’? Plausibility is easiest to grasp; in essence, a narrative is ‘plausible’, i.e. believable if it coheres with the normative social script/s on the subject being narrated. In the case of rape, for example, a narrative about being raped by one’s lover, or by someone known, loved, and trusted, especially someone with whom one has had consensual sex with in the past, fails and fails for one simple reason: our representations of rape – in the media, in water-cooler gossip, in conversations with others, in literature and so on – represent it, overwhelmingly, as something which happens between strangers. I am walking home at dusk and a man with a gun/knife/broken bottle neck jumps out of a bush, holds me down and rapes me. That is a plausible rape story. But plausibility, like love, is never enough; I have to establish credibility too.

Jane Foress Bennett⁵⁵ identifies two salient features of ‘credibility’: firstly, ‘credibility’ is the degree to which the survivor can establish her innocence. What this means, in effect, is that she must be able to ‘show’ that she did not know that she was in a vulnerable or dangerous position prior to the rape. That

she was not ‘complicit’ in her rape. This says something very interesting about our collective assumptions about rape – that, under certain circumstances a rape survivor can occasion her own rape and in so doing ‘deserve’ it and if the rape was deserved then that rape is acceptable, is not, in short, rape. So if, as I was walking home at dusk I was dressed in a mini skirt, or if I was in fact walking home in the dark, or if the man greeted me first and I smiled or winked in return, or if the rape took place at home and the perpetrator was my lover and so on and so forth, then my story fails to be ‘credible’ and as such the narrative ‘I’ fails to materialize in any politically meaningful way. Secondly, ‘credibility’ is “a function of a relation between a pragmatic voice and the narrative ‘I’ claimed for that voice in oral autobiography”⁵⁶. Bennett ⁵⁷ goes on to point out that “‘credibility’ refers to (fictive, temporary) stabilization of the storyteller’s identity, a stabilization that unifies her pragmatic and narrative selves under conditions comfortable for the listener.” What this means is that the listener has to be able to connect the flesh and blood ‘I’ who is doing the telling to all the ‘other’ ‘I’s in the story. As Bennett ⁵⁸ points out, in South Africa, sadly, there is almost no scenario in which credibility will not be prised from you if you are a woman. Almost no scenario because – and the horror of this irony chills to the bone – female babies can be ‘credibly’ raped.

But what has all of this to do with disability? How do I dare, with such conviction and so clear a conscience, assert a link between the problems and politics of representation that face rape survivors and the problems and politics of representation that face people with ‘invisible’ disabilities (this is not to imply that visible disabilities and those who ‘have’ them do not face problems too, indeed they do, and, if you think of how difficult it is to secure one’s rights and place in the human community with a visible disability imagine what someone, such as myself, faces when trying to secure the same but on the basis of a difference that is invisible).

Again, the guiding assumption here with regards to credibility is that a ‘real’ disabled person experiences disability in X ways and responds to the violation of disablement in Y ways. Closely related variations on the same theme will be carefully considered and the merits decided at the discretion of the

judges. But any deviation from this ‘should’ be treated with suspicion and the validity of the claim questioned. We saw this with Khwezi; we see it with people with disabilities, and, no doubt, we will go on seeing it⁵⁹.

Notes

¹ J.F. Bennett. “Credibility, plausibility and autobiographical oral narrative: some suggestions from the analysis of a rape survivor’s testimony.” *Power, Culture, and Difference*. (Levett et al (Eds.) (London: Zed Books, 1997) 96-108.

² Frantz Fanon Memorial at Fort-de-France, *Inscription*

³ J. Butler. *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1990); p.2

⁴ T. Siebers. “Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body” in *American Literary History*, (13(4): 737-754, 2001); p.746

⁵ S. Alaimo & S. Hekman. 2008. “Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory” *Material Feminisms* Alaimo & Hekman (Eds.) Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 1-19; p. 1

⁶ V. Kirby. “Corporeal Habits: Addressing Essentialism Differently” in *Hypatia* (6(3). 4-24, 1991); p.7

⁷ *Ibid*; 1991, p.10

⁸ French, S. “Disability, impairment or something in between?” *Disabling Barriers – Enabling Environments*. J. Swain, V. Finkelstein, S. French & M. Oliver (Eds.) (London: Sage, 1993: 17-24) p.17

⁹ R.M. Veatch. “The Medical Model: Its Nature & Problems” *The Hastings Center of Studies*, (1973, 1(3): 59-76) p.64

¹⁰ M. Priestly, M. “Developing disability studies programmes: the international context.” *Disability and Social Change: A South African Agenda*. Watermeyer et al (Eds.) (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006, 19-30)

¹¹ C. Thomas, C. & M. Corker, M. “A Journey around the Social Model.” *Disability/Postmodernity*. Shakespeare & Corker (Eds.) (London: Continuum. 18-31, 2002) p.18

¹² See Daitz, 2009a [unpublished]; T. Shakespeare Shakespeare, T. “Critiquing the Social Model” *Disability Rights and Wrongs*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006, 29-53)

¹³ A. Rich, A. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” *Signs* (5(4): 1980, 631-660)

¹⁴ Hekman, S. “Constructing the Ballast: An Ontology for Feminism” *Material Feminisms*. Alaimo & Hekman (Eds.) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008, 85-199) p.92

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 2008, p.93

¹⁶ de Beauvoir cited in Kirby, 1991, p. 5

¹⁷ T. Siebers, T. “Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body.” *American Literary History*, (13(4): 2001, 737-754) p.749

¹⁸ See T. Shakespeare. “Critiquing the Social Model” *Disability Rights and Wrongs*. (London and New York: Routledge.29-53, 2006)

¹⁹ See Watermeyer et al, 2006

²⁰ K. Barad, K. “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.” *Material Feminisms* Alaimo & Hekman (Eds.) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008) pp. 120-154

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 120

²² Butler, J. *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1990)

²³ Barad, 2008

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.131

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.133

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.135

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- ²⁷ UPIAS (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation) 1975. *Fundamental Principles of Disability*. Available at: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/UPIAS/fundamental%20principles.pdf> Accessed at: 14:00 October 2009, p.3
- ²⁸ Shakespeare, 2006
- ²⁹ Corker and Thomas, 2001
- ³⁰ French, 2001
- ³¹ Shakespeare, 2006, p. 53
- ³² Mairs, N. 1996. *Waist-High in the World: A Life among the Nondisabled* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996)
- ³³ Wade, C. M. 1994. *It Ain't Exactly Sexy: The Ragged Edge. The Disability Experience from the Pages of the First Fifteen Years of The Disability Rag*. Barrett Shaw (ed.) (Louisville, KY: Advocado Press, 1994, 88-9) pp.12-13
- ³⁴ Ibid, p.12-13
- ³⁵ Ibid, p.12-13 (italics mine)
- ³⁶ Ibid, pp. 88-89
- ³⁷ Ibid, pp 88-89
- ³⁸ (reference)
- ³⁹ Barad, 2008, p.130
- ⁴⁰ Siebers, 2001, pp. 743-4
- ⁴¹ Ibid, p. 744
- ⁴² Ibid, p.745
- ⁴³ Ibid, p.745
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, p.745
- ⁴⁵ French, 1993, pp. 17-19
- ⁴⁶ Barad, 2008, pp. 157 – 158, Italics mine
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 111
- ⁴⁸ Hekman, 2008, p. 111
- ⁴⁹ Barad, 2008, p.111
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, 2008
- ⁵¹ J. Butler, 1990
- ⁵² Ibid, p.2
- ⁵³ 1997
- ⁵⁴ 1990; 1993
- ⁵⁵ 1997, pp.100-1
- ⁵⁶ Bennett, 1997, p.101
- ⁵⁷ Ibid, p.102
- ⁵⁸ Gender & Violence course notes, 2009
- ⁵⁹ Private email correspondence between Khanya Mncwabe and Emma Daitz, 2009