CANADIAN JOURNAL OF
Disability Studies
Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association

Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca

Jeffrey Preston (2017). *The Fantasy of Disability: Images of loss in popular culture*. New York: Routledge.
ISBN: 978-1-4724-6796-6

Reviewed by Mikhel Hudrlik, California State University San Bernardino
hudrlik1@gmail.com

Portrayals of disability in mainstream culture and media, and questions about the implications they have for disabled people, are not new. However, in *The Fantasy of Disability: Images of loss in popular culture*, Jeffrey Preston takes those questions to new places. This book challenges how we think of, analyze, and view disability in popular culture, and whose disability narratives are being told. Preston examines how portrayals of disability in popular culture tell us more about the creators' ideas, fears, and anxieties about disability, than about disability itself. He flips the medical gaze from the disabled community to the normate community through psychoanalysis by outlining a handful of "fantasies" creators display in portrayals of disability in war films and teen dramas (20).

Preston immediately engages with disability and media scholars and the current language of the field. He introduces the text through a short personal anecdote of being stared at by the normate, illustrating the current discussions of the role, importance, and value of personal experience in Disability Studies. He then uses current theory to explain how and why he is using various terms. For example, he employs Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's "normate," meaning someone who is not disabled, to further mean someone who has little to no interaction with disabled people or the disability community (4). This allows for a more nuanced distinction than the abled/disabled binary, which glosses over the complexity of able-disabled interactions (4-5). Preston further comments the drawbacks of the social and medical models as they emerge in

popular culture (7). He then introduces his main influence, Julia Kristeva, whose idea of a "narcissistic identity wound" will guide and support his arguments throughout the book (26). Preston argues that disability in popular culture is not about representation of "lived disability," disability as experienced by disabled people (9). Rather, Preston views disability representations as dependent on reproduced social and cultural stereotypes about limitations disabled people's lives, and how they cope with disablement. He describes the fantasy of disability as a "net of ideas," created across a group rather than by an individual, that is used to "contain the danger of limitation" (9). Preston offers a look at how the fantasies about disability speak to normate fears of human vulnerability.

Fantasy of Disability is part of the "Interdisciplinary Disability Studies" series, and Preston's book uses a combination of different fields to analyze his texts. It is interesting to note that though Preston sets up his work as equally engaging with Disability Studies, psychoanalysis, and Media Studies, throughout his text psychoanalysis has the heaviest presence. Although Disability Studies is still present, Media Studies scholarship appears only intermittently throughout the book. This reflects Preston's main concern with analyzing how disability threatens the normate psyche. Disability, he maintains, acts as a "castration," often both literally (penis) and metaphorically (phallus) (35). The fear of castration is extensively covered throughout each of the individual chapters, and it is clear that Preston is primarily concerned with questions of psycho- and psychosexual analysis. In his literature review psychoanalysis is discussed in-depth, especially the theoretical genealogy of Kristeva's work. Kristeva's "narcissistic identity wound," as Preston uses it, is when the normate cannot see or comprehend the disabled person as part of the same world of possibilities as themselves. In order to avoid an

"identity wound," or confront the potential of future disability in themselves, the normate isolates the disabled individual(s) from normate society as a protective measure.

The psychosexual analysis and specific fantasies of disability begin to appear in chapter three, "Corporeal casualties: Vietnam War film and the fantasy of disability." Preston argues that fantasies of disability are self-perpetuating, that "*ideas, anxieties*, and *fantasies* about disability [… are] generated less from encounters with actual disabled subjects than from other media productions that claim to represent disability" (39, Preston's emphasis). This specific framing of the "claim" of representation will resonate throughout Preston's analysis, as he argues that the implication of a "true" claim allows for fantasies to continue in self-perpetuation ad infinitum.

He examines three Vietnam-era war films: *Coming Home*, *Deer Hunter*, and *Born on the 4th of July*. Each character Preston examines here is a white, middle-class, (implied heterosexual and cisgendered,) male wheelchair user. Some of the fantasies from these movies include: disability is the same as, and yet somehow worse than, death; disability is castration, both physical (becoming impotent, castration of the penis), and figurative (removal of masculinity and sexuality, castration the phallus) (51); disabled people prefer living in a hospital with other disabled people, offering the illusion of choice of the disabled person (53); disability, shame, and blame are fused together into one concept (61); disability *requires* you to be dependent on others for basic necessary tasks, such as using the restroom (64, 68). Though these are but a handful of the fantasies Preston analyzes, they appear regularly throughout the book, and refer back to the original question of how fantasies of disability impact actual/lived disability.

For instance, the fantasy that disabled individuals prefer living in a hospital or being in the presence of, or in a relationship with, other disabled individuals could be one way in which

the myth of the nonsexual and feminized disabled male came about and was subsequently reinforced. Throughout the three movies analyzed it is clear that disability and masculinity (which implicitly includes sexuality, specifically heterosexuality) are mutually exclusive. This is just one way in which the fantasies of disability, perpetuated by the normate creator, impacts actual/lived disability experience. When these fantasies go unanalyzed and unchallenged, they become the norm, and something which the disabled individual has to disprove.

The questions and fantasies of masculinity, death, and castration continue in chapter four, "Fantasizing disablement in *Degrassi: The Next Generation*." As *Degrassi* is positioned as an educational show, it explicitly makes the claims of "being truthful and authentic, providing *real* views into *real* problems" (79, Preston's emphasis). However, according to Preston, the 'representation' through the character of wheelchair-user Jimmy Brooks is not for disabled people. Instead, it is for the normate to separate themselves from the anxiety of limitation and castration (79). This metaphorical (and sometimes physical, through use of the hospital-as-prison fantasy) segregation of disability shows up throughout both the Vietnam War films *and* the teen dramas. It is further emphasized through the fantasy of a cure in *Degrassi* – the idea that disability is useful as a period of character development or to push the story forward. This segment of Preston's analysis appears to be very similar to Mitchell and Snyder's seminal theory of Narrative Prosthesis, where disability is used solely as a prosthesis or crutch to push the plot forward. However, Preston appears to not wish to engage with that theory, dismissing it in a brief comment earlier in the text, on the basis that it "does not explore [disability's] psychic dimension" (18). A similar gap in Preston's work is that he is specifically focused on the (castration) anxieties that disability produces in the normate, yet he does not engage with Ato Quayson's theory of Aesthetic Nervousness. Aesthetic Nervousness explicitly examines the

tensions between the normate and disability in representations of disability in media, though the theory is not mentioned.

In chapter five, "Dream On: Fantasizing Disability in *Glee*," Preston offers a different take on many of the fantasies previously mentioned. Though *Glee* does not explicitly claim to be educational or "real" like *Degrassi*, Preston claims the implications of "honesty" are present due to the darker themes of the show (112). Preston notably evolves an interesting concept of *Glee* being the normate itself. *Glee* seems contradictory in its use and contact with disability: constantly segregating disability while at the same time arguing that it is progressive and inclusive. This is similar in some ways to how disabled people are treated by the normate in lived experience (147). Additionally, *Glee* is inherently ableist, and does not *realize* that it is, causing the same kind of damage that the well-meaning ableist normate might (147). It seems that an attempt, claim to, and subsequent failure of disability representation is more damaging than acknowledging one's own ignorance.

It is also possible that Preston's distinct focus on segregation of disability and the fantasies that inherently frame disability as a negative, threatening, or limiting, may be hindering his own analysis. For instance, when Jimmy (*Degrassi*) interacts with a disabled nurse in the hospital who tells him that a "wheelchair is only a "prison" if he allows it to be," the segment is introduced under the parallels of the medical world and prisons, and Preston only briefly mentions that "[here] it would appear that the confining nature of wheelchairs is dependent on an individual's worldview" (90). This moment could be doing something that complicates the fantasy of disability as needing to be cured, instead allowing for a reading of assistive devices allowing the individual to regain independence, but it is not discussed further. Furthermore, Jimmy is black, yet his race is dismissed in favor of focusing on the parts of his identity which fit

into Preston's criteria: male, middle-class, and wheelchair user. Though never stated explicitly, there is an underlying implication that each of Preston's disabled males examined are heterosexual and cisgender. Preston's discussions of what masculinity and sexuality (or the lack thereof) consist of work to reinforce cis- and heteronormativity.

One of the other fantasies Preston examines is the idea of a "crip mentor" (104). The crip mentor fantasy is that "*only* another individual with a disability could possibly comprehend and provide advice on how to manage […] as the experience [of disability] is rarified and exclusionary" (104-105, Preston's emphasis). This is complicated in a later chapter discussing *Glee* where Preston shows a disabled character helping a normate who is 'temporarily disabled' by performing as a crip mentor (118-119). But if disability can only be understood by disabled individuals, then would those who are experiencing a temporary limitation *really* be able to understand a crip mentor's advice? Temporary limitation or 'temporary disability' is a complex idea in and of itself and brings up questions on what could be considered a disability. What "counts" as disability? Must all disability be permanent? Does functionality (or perceived levels thereof, such as a character with glasses or an invisible disability) impact whether a disability is viewed as a disability?

Furthermore, there is the question of the female disabled body, and how it relates to the idea of castration that Preston focuses on. The female disabled body is only *very* briefly mentioned directly, used to further an analysis of a male character (144), despite Preston's list of disabled characters in *Glee* and *Degrassi* including female characters. The question of gender, other than cis-male, is limited to the relationship cis-female, able-bodied characters have with the cis-male, disabled characters. Preston fails to offer an intersectional analysis of disability by focusing on only white (or de-racialized, in the case of Jimmy Brooks), middle class, wheelchair

using, cisgendered and heterosexual males. The examination of intersections of disability experiences are thus confined to the theoretical and academic lenses Preston uses.

While Preston's analysis leaves me wanting in some ways, *The Fantasy of Disability: Images of loss in popular culture* offers an interesting and in-depth analysis of how disability "representation" reveals more about the normate than disability itself. The connection of the fantasies crossing from Vietnam-era war films to teen dramas like *Degrassi* and *Glee* open pathways for further analysis and examination of implications of fantasies about disability being perpetuated through popular culture. The use Preston makes of the "normate" to account for those who have contact with disability, but are not disabled, is a compelling addition to the field. In the conclusion, Preston leaves us with a powerful anecdote, returning to the use of the personal that he opened with, subtly reminding us of the importance of personal experience in Disability Studies. It emphasizes how popular media's use of disability impacts *actual* disabled people. Finally, Preston leaves us with a challenge to think about human vulnerability (and disability), as an opportunity rather than a limitation.

References

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon Snyder (2000). *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Michigan: U. of Michigan Press.

Quayson, Ato (2007). *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. New York: Columbia UP.