

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 d'études sur le handicap**

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca

**Jonathan Sterne. (2022). *Diminished Faculties*. Durham [NC]: Duke University Press:
ISBN: 9781478017707**

Cinzia Di Placido
McGill University
cinzia.diplacido@mail.mcgill.ca

In *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment*, Jonathan Sterne shares his experience with vocality after experiencing a paralyzed vocal cord from thyroid cancer. Sterne grapples with his changing voice and his positionality toward disability while trying to make sense of these experiences through *impairment phenomenology*, a novel approach used in disability studies. This book was not meant to be organized in a traditional way as it lacks a proper introduction and conclusion. Rather, in each chapter, Sterne integrates personal reflections, blog posts, theories, and artistic pieces to develop *impairment phenomenology*.

The 1st chapter opens with Sterne waking up from unconsciousness during a thyroid surgery (or thinking that he woke up). The chapter continues with Sterne sharing his story about the events that led up to this experience and those that followed. His vulnerability and honesty shine through as he describes the multiple surgeries, tests, and treatments he endured. Waking up with a changed voice, Sterne had to navigate a world which places importance on vocalization and imposes deficit views on different sounding voices. Intertwined in the chapter between his personal accounts, Sterne contemplates the definitions of impairment and disability while acknowledging their historical, cultural, and political roots. Sterne powerfully argues that *impairment phenomenology* is a type of *political phenomenology* as it challenges the notions of power held by institutions over disability and the lack of agency that individuals have over their faculties.

In Chapter 2, Sterne delves into vocal prostheses and his experiences with using a voice amplifier. Here, Sterne reflects on the normalization of voice amplifying assistive technology in certain settings and for certain professions such as teacher or tour guide and not for people with disabilities. Those labeled with a disability affecting their voice, use voice amplifiers to reach a standard deemed normal by society. Sterne's recollections highlight the roles that assistive technology play in various settings and the stigmatization of these devices beyond normalized contexts. This chapter further emphasizes the disconnect between mouth and voice caused by a voice amplifier since the voice is not emanating from where it's 'supposed to'. This disconnect is thought provoking as it raises complex questions about what it means to have a voice, where voice comes from, and the vocality of voice. Throughout, Sterne reflects on how he is continuously repositioning himself in relation to his own voice, how he uses his voice, and the importance of his voice.

Chapter 3 presents an imaginary exhibition called "In Search of New Vocalities" on the different ways that voice can be expressed. This imaginary exhibition is designed as a literal exhibition with descriptions of the environment (including accessibility initiatives), artistic pieces (including audio descriptions), and the option to learn more by 'clicking' [*]. Sterne's exhibition eloquently demonstrated the relationship between voices, objects, and individuals through artist pieces as metaphors for voice. The meticulously chosen artistic pieces represent voice as power and agency in the form of waves, hand gestures, synthetic voice, and more. Overall, the exhibition reveals the intersectionality between voice, class, gender, and race in ways which challenge ableist assumptions of voice.

The 4th chapter explores the impairment of a different faculty – hearing. In this chapter, Sterne defines and applies the term *audible scarification*. *Audible scarification* is a framework

used to understand auditory impairments which are culturally and socially produced. Building on this framework, Sterne explains how there is a social expectation for adults in urbanized/industrialized civilizations to have some degree of hearing loss. For instance, people experience loudness (voluntarily) in many spaces such as rock concerts and movie theaters. Additionally, certain professionals including soldiers or industrial workers must withstand loud noises as part of their job. As such, people need to have some sort of hearing impairment to tolerate 21st century Western society. Although the saying hearing loss is common, people who identify with the D/deaf community prefer the term *Deaf Gain*, while some individuals do not experience hearing loss, but rather hearing sensitivities. Ultimately, Sterne's purpose of using *audible scarification* was to demonstrate "the essential plurality of hearingness" (p. 134).

Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on the faculty of fatigue as a 'normal' impairment. Sterne describes fatigue as a political phenomenon because fatigue is experienced by everyone in different ways. To conceptualize fatigue, Sterne uses spoon theory, an "intersectional theory of fatigue, capitalism, and subjectivity developed, circulated, and used by people with disabilities" (p. 162). This theory is based on a depletionist model of fatigue where an individual starts off with a certain amount of energy (or spoons) – where individuals with disabilities start off with less spoons – and every task they complete takes away some energy (or a spoon). As such, when there is no more energy to expel, fatigue is left. After describing fatigue through the spoon theory, Sterne moved toward non-depletionist models of fatigue. Through these models, fatigue is something that individuals possess and is in an active state. Fatigue is relational with many different aspects to it including physiological, physical, and psychological. When applying non-depletionist perspectives to fatigue, Sterne challenges assumptions that fatigue is something to be

overcome rather than part of human existence – making fatigue a political issue which is socially produced.

Although *Diminished Faculties* does not have an official conclusion, Sterne provides a user's guide on impairment theory at the end of the book as a tool for readers. I commended Sterne for writing a practical user's guide for readers to understand theoretical ideas about impairment and how to apply these ideas to everyday situations. The user's guide begins with a definition of impairment theory and theory more generally. Then, it provides steps on how to use impairment theory followed by a troubleshooting section with ways to apply impairment theory to fit particular contexts. There is also a liability statement urging individuals to be mindful when applying impairment theory as it cannot be applied to all situations involving impairment. The user's guide ends with a section on how to dispose of impairment theory when it is no longer useful and considerations for future versions of this theory. As a conclusion, this user's guide – organized as a literal user's guide – is intriguing as it provides the reader with an overview of the main theory used in the book.

This book explores impairment through several faculties such as voice, hearing, and fatigue. The ways that impairment phenomenology can be used to understand impairment of these faculties is a thread throughout the entire book. I believe that the most significant aspects of the book were those when Sterne shared his personal experiences with the faculties discussed. For instance, in the chapter about fatigue, Sterne is candid about the fact that he encountered fatigue while writing this book which affected the writing process and timeline. While the style of *Diminished Faculties* is untraditional, it carries the same value in academic writing as it is a book with strong theoretical frameworks, clear methodological approach, and researcher anecdotes on positionality. To end this review, I applaud Sterne's ability to write a book which

comes full circle – the book begins with him awakening from an unconscious state and ends with him falling into an unconscious sleep.