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Political Affinities and Complex Identities: Critical Approaches to Disability Organizing

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Abstract

This article addresses the criticism that critical disability studies (CDS) is morally relativistic and politically unhelpful. Written from the perspective of a current CDS practitioner, this response foregrounds political approaches to disability that are based on materialist and intersectional modes of analysis derived from CDS insights. Recent CDS scholarship is assessed through a historiographical review, and relevant political trajectories are contrasted with the call for "clear ethical guidelines" and approaches to advocacy based on a politics of identity, vulnerability, and reified difference. Throughout this discussion, binary framings of postmodern/modern, discursive/materialistic, theory/praxis, among other pairings, are challenged through a review of existing overlaps, and a consideration of constructive directions stemming from these syntheses.

Keywords

Historiography; Critical Disability Theory; Materialism; Intersectionality; Identity Politics.

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Introduction

'Critical Disability Studies' (CDS) generally describes a research orientation that seeks to expose underlying structures of oppression that affect people with disabilities; it also presumes that other forms of disability studies do not address these root problems. These assumptions were articulated in an article published six years ago by Helen Meekosha and Russell Shuttleworth (2009) that defines CDS as an approach which, among other goals, strives to locate and challenge dualistic ways of conceptualizing disability and impairment. Through a genealogical discussion, Meekosha and Shuttleworth demonstrate that "using the term 'CDS' is a move away from the preoccupation with binary understandings," (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, p. 50) especially in understanding relationships between impairment and disability. This influential working-model of CDS outlines several key features, including a concern with autonomy and emancipation; the linking of theory and praxis; a rejection of positivist thinking; and self-reflexivity. CDS can hence be thought of as encompassing a spectrum of theoretical positions and varying accounts of disability with shared strategies for conducting critique. As critical disability studies continues to develop, generating more and more CDS-identified research, it is once again helpful to engage in self-reflexive discussions of critical disability contributions to social justice struggles. After all, critical disability approaches have been noted for their adaptability and responsiveness to new forms of oppression, especially as these structures arise within the disability movement (Meekosha and

Shuttleworth, p. 48). A recent critique which rejects CDS as an "ethically and politically unhelpful" ideology (Vehmas and Watson, 2013, p. 12) has served as the impetus for this re-evaluation.¹

"Moral Wrongs, Disadvantages, and Disability: A Critique of Critical Disability Studies," an article by Simo Vehmas and Nick Watson, suggests that disability activism requires clear ethical guidelines. This proposal is in tension with certain 'critical' understandings of disability, which, as Meekosha and Shuttleworth explain, arose in response to the co-option of 'regular' disability studies language for normalizing ends (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, p. 51). Fluid conceptions of identity are often favoured by critical disability scholars and tend to resist simplification, complicating the ways in which disability is 'operationalized'. According to Vehmas and Watson, CDS scholars tend to over-theorize disability; their work does not provide the practical political tools that are necessary for improving the lives of people with disabilities, mainly because of the adoption of the post-structural method of deconstruction. The authors claim that CDS is steeped in relativism and that it cannot capture either the economic basis of disability (Vehmas and Watson, p. 9-10) or its embodied experience (Vehmas and Watson, p. 5). According to their reading, CDS does not contain a materialist strain and its practitioners tend to ignore the body. Vehmas and Watson apply the logic of parallelism (Vehmas and Watson, p. 11) that explicitly denies the possibility of intersectionality, or the ability to view markers of difference such as race, disability, sexuality, and gender, as mutually constituting rather than as discrete categories of oppression. Finally, the authors call for "common understanding" (Vehmas and Watson, p. 6), advocating for the creation of guidelines that will enable us to measure and compare disadvantages for the purpose of resource allocation (Vehmas and Watson, p. 8).

¹This paper employs the term 'critical theory' somewhat synonymously with Critical Theory, referring to the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Since there is no uniformity in CDS, the approaches highlighted in the following discussion are only intended to characterize potential trajectories; this is done to avoid the polarizing effect of upholding strong distinctions between critical disability and other approaches, and in recognition of the overlap and shared interests that are evident within existing frameworks.

Above all, the present article, written from a CDS perspective, agrees with Vehmas and Watson's observation that CDS has been distinguished by its postmodern openness. As Meekosha and Shuttleworth have outlined, this openness stems from the rejection of objective certainty and, along with these positivist claims, the use of binary models to understand experiences of disability and impairment (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, p. 50). This paper does, however, take issue with Vehmas and Watson's characterization of CDS as a postmodern political ideology that is ethically void, arguing instead that what appears to Vehmas and Watson as arbitrary can rather be understood as reflecting a competing model of social justice, specifically, one that prioritizes processes of empowerment over distributive ends. This alternative reading highlights approaches within CDS which are arguably conducive to democratic participation and to enhancing access to resources, as well as to altering the very nature of these resources themselves, and which critically engage with identity politics in an effort to advance inclusion without reinforcing categories of difference. It is important to note that this paper does not engage in a systematic refutation of Vehmas and Watson's assumptions about CDS, as Meekosha and Shuttleworth's essay anticipated many of these arguments, nor does it engage with the divisions that Vehmas and Watson assume between discourse and political change, which has been well established elsewhere, and most recently by Jan Grue (2015). Instead, this article attempts to contribute to understandings of current divisions among disability activists and researchers who are working against related forms of oppression. It does this by considering the backlash to postmodern theory that is articulated in, but by no means unique to, Vehmas and Watson's discussion and call for a metrics of disadvantage. By framing postmodern theoretical contributions alongside historical materialist and intersectional analyses of disability oppression, this paper offers a rejoinder to Vehmas and Watson's critique of CDS through a historiographical review, situating the authors' understanding of CDS within

the age-old tensions – or perceived tensions—between mind and body, correct and false consciousness, and insider and outsider group status,

The first section of this paper traces how such dualisms may affect the dynamics of organizing for social change among people with disabilities and their allies; the focus of this section is primarily on issues of agency and elitism, and its goal is to understand how certain power structures might be perpetuated if we do not remain critical of fixed identity statuses and continue to question the value and unintended consequences of such categories. The second section of this paper engages with the implications of Vehmas and Watson's suggestion that disability emancipation requires concrete measures and guidelines. This section addresses Meekosha and Shuttleworth's insight into CDS research trends and updates their survey with a discussion of historical materialist and intersectional approaches to disability. I argue that these attempts to recognize the complexity of disability identities and experiences provide an alternative to an approach that favours metrics and resource competition. The importance of fostering more democratic and intersectional approaches to change and the value of postmodern theory in this project is demonstrated by drawing upon contemporary Marxist analyses of justice and oppression. Finally, by framing these issues as a discussion of leadership and intellectualism, this paper hopes to inspire further debate about the practical aspects of organizing.

Empowerment and Epistemic Authority

Throughout their discussion of CDS, Vehmas and Watson express anxiety about the apparent replacement of materialist concerns with a postmodern preoccupation with deconstruction. Their argument tends to conflate CDS with a postmodern theoretical approach. In an attempt to balance this reading, the following discussion will emphasize materialist strains within CDS and argue that postmodernism and historical materialism are not mutually exclusive frameworks. Indeed, as noted

historical materialist David Harvey cautions, we should avoid overstating the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism. Harvey reminds us that it is "dangerous to depict complex relations as simple polarizations," or to think of the postmodern turn as a radical break (Harvey, 1989, p. 42). Instead of an orthodox rejection or strict adherence to either approach, he encourages us to focus on constructive connections and the revolutionary potential that postmodern theory presents in contesting neo-conservatism. His conclusion is that the typical postmodern concern with 'otherness' encourages groups of people who have been historically excluded to speak for themselves (Harvey, p. 116). While Harvey is skeptical of postmodernism's ability to effectively empower these voices, he nevertheless recognizes the opportunity this approach presents for an inclusive framework.

The dual concern for inclusion and self-representation has been a core value among disability activists for many decades, and it remains a major preoccupation that connects critical disability and with 'older' disability studies approaches. The British Social Model, derived from the political work of the *Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation* (UPIAS) and famously articulated by Mike Oliver and Vic Finklestein, made self-representation an explicit aim by exposing the contradictions between representation and reality for many people with disabilities, specifically by pointing out how cultural images often "violate the actual experience of disability" (Oliver, 1990, p. 62). CDS continues this tradition of contestation, with many critical disability projects arising in response to perceived authoritarian tendencies among applications of the social model of disability that were connected to Marxist materialist approaches (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, p. 50). Locating Vehmas and Watson's critique within this debate around materialist traditions and associated power structures provides insight into the implications of some of their recommendations. While the authors distinguish themselves from social modelist claims that disability is a socially constructed form of oppression by placing impairment at the centre of their analysis, they do so through a materialist lens that assumes a certain fixity of

impairment and its effects. As we will see, this simplification is linked to attempts to operationalize impairment differences. However, an unintended consequence of this conscious or strategic simplification is that more nuanced aspects of lived experience are eclipsed, thereby excluding people with disabilities who do not relate to certain dominant narratives of impairment and disability. As Tom Shakespeare points out, "There is complexity and variation in disability responses," and this is especially true for ethical questions (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 114). One might extend his insight to conclude that moral guidelines are problematic because they are unlikely to account for such diversity.

Certain interpretative strains within CDS already link disability to different forms of oppression by attempting to conceptualize experience more inclusively and fluidly; within this tradition one can identify a Marxist approach to disability that is distinguished by its anti-elitism. As reflected, for example, in the work of Nirmala Erevelles (2011), such an approach is notable for its privileging of autonomy, the creation of space for grassroots organizing, and democratic processes. In part, this approach stems from a heightened concern around identity politics and elitism in social organizing—subjects which have been discussed at length but which will be useful to revisit as these strategies remain divisive in disability movements. Following the critical disability methodologies represented in the work of Meekosha, Corker, and Erevelles, among others, we can see how intersectionality offers an opportunity to respond to structures of elitism and to the hierarchical layering of experiences more generally. Intersectional frameworks allow us to incorporate race, sexuality, gender, and other markers of difference towards an analysis of disability experience that acknowledges how these aspects of identity are mutually constituting and that is attentive to their reciprocal rather than additive nature. This intersectional framework relates certain characteristics of CDS scholarship which may be contrasted with claims to 'correct' knowledge and leadership.

The suggestion that CDS scholars risk over-theorizing disability to the point where it becomes a politically neutral category (Vehmas and Watson, p. 12) can be placed within a broader debate over the role of the scholar in practical life. Tracing modern discourses on intellectualism, Stephen T. Leonard reveals the contested nature of this concept and describes the political ramifications of defining a role for ethical leadership (1996). In their critique of CDS, Vehmas and Watson present two competing conceptions of intellectualism that may be read through Leonard's model. On the one hand, we have a politically engaged scholar who maintains a moral obligation to their society (Leonard, pp. 10-11). On the other, there is the detached academic, who is a mere theoretician. The latter group includes those "whose focus is on seminal diffusion of ideas to students, without any predicate for societal action" (Leonard, quoting J. P. Nettl, p. 15), and aligns with Vehmas and Watson's characterization of CDS scholars who are allegedly "shirking from intellectual and ethical responsibility" (Vehmas and Watson, p. 5). Following Leonard's invitation to explore the political ramifications of these definitions (Leonard, p. 18), we can begin to imagine the impact of such a dichotomy on disability activism and organizing.

In contrast to the CDS or postmodern scholar's apparent detachment, Vehmas and Watson present an appeal to what Leonard terms the legislator intellectual tradition. According to Leonard, this brand of intellectualism "appeals to a certain kind of epistemic authority, his knowledge of the transcendent, the universal, the truth and just for all," and he claims to work for the common good (Leonard, p. 17). Vehmas and Watson are aware that such positivist thinking is in tension with the typical critical disability denial of absolute certainties (a denial that Meekosha traces to the Frankfurt School, rather than to the postmodern strategy of discourse analysis, as Vehmas and Watson have done). Their critique, however, does not address the practical reasons for CDS' rejection of absolutes, and frames this as a theoretical action. Critical disability approaches tend to begin with the premise that fixed conceptions of identity inherently deny differences in lived experiences and further marginalize

individuals within oppressed groups. So, when Vehmas and Watson dismiss disability as a fluid identity status, particularly in their discussion of Margrit Shildrick's work (Vehmas and Watson, p. 3), they are inadvertently ignoring the embodied experiences of disability scholars such as Tobin Siebers (2008), who represents his disability experience as fluid and changing.

Critical disability feminists with similarly fluid experiences have articulated the on-again-off-again nature of their impairments and the effects this has had on their sense of disability identity, explaining, for example, that in certain contexts, their impairment – such as the experience of chronic pain – is absent. Other materialist traditions within CDS, as reflected in a recent study by Malhotra and Rowe (2013), apply a phenomenological lens to everyday experiences (Malhotra and Rowe, pp. 5-6). Malhotra and Rowe's study suggests a framework that is not only conducive to intersectional understandings of oppression, but also supportive of historical materialist approaches to disability. Far from ignoring "the pragmatic and mundane issues of day-to-day living" (Vehmas and Watson, p. 5) and the broader material reality of oppression, critical disability traditions have directly engaged with economic structures and corporeal experiences of the body. Malhotra and Rowe's close analysis of the material and ideological dimensions of oppression from a first-person perspective is one of many that has helped reveal the complex, intersectional nature of individual experience.

It may be seen as ironic that one of the goals of the legislator intellectual is the creation of unity, as the history of this orientation within disability movements reveals that this approach has had the effect of creating deeper fissures. Remarking on these consequences in 1998, Mairian Corker identifies certain political divisions between Deaf communities, defined as linguistic and cultural minorities, and people with hearing impairments. She reads these divisions as a form of essentialist thinking that reduces Deafness and impairment to distinct experiences that "have some essential nature" (p.15). This appeal to essential differences allows for anything that falls outside of the delineated boundaries of these

constructs to be reduced or erased (p.15). Corker maintains that the privileging of one position as 'more right' than its opposite is the main cause of fragmentation between groups with similar experiences of oppressions, noting that this poses significant barriers to organizing that closely resemble debates occurring within feminist movements (Corker, p.18, p.27). The logic of essentialism, she claims, is the root of the division between Deaf people and people who identify as hearing impaired, and is partly to blame for the marginalization of individuals with hearing impairments by a dominant Deaf culture and their disempowerment through barred access to funding and services. Within the disability movement, Corker observes that such "fragmentation is the enemy of effective political action" (Corker, p. 32), and her analysis frames the debate as a concern over how best to achieve unity and promote positive and inclusive change.

Vehmas and Watson's article appears to have elided the practical implications of Corker's discussion. Their critique includes a summary of Corker's understanding of deafness as promoting fluid views of identity that are harmful to disability organizing, and they interpret CDS as eroding disabled/nondisabled differences (Vehmas and Watson, p. 2,11). This characterization overlooks Corker's efforts to strengthen the disability movement by finding common ground with Deaf communities, as well as her important warning that people with disabilities must be cautious of non-disabled allies and attentive to power structures in these relationships so that only empowering relations with allies are cultivated (Corker, pp. 139-140). Moreover, Vehmas and Watson's article does not engage with one of the broader points of Corker's study, which is the promotion of inclusive change that is beneficial not only to people with disabilities, but to all people (Corker, p. 142). According to Corker, discourse is a valuable tool for this political end, as it allows for the conceptual linking of experiences related to multifaceted identities (Corker, p. 143). In contrast to the concerns of activists like Corker with empowerment, the legislator intellectual seeks to enhance their own authoritative power while

claiming that they are acting for society's benefit (Leonard, following Zygmunt Bauman, p. 17). A similar claim can be found within the Marxist coding of 'wrongful' opinion as false consciousness, which Meekosha and Shuttleworth suggest as an example of top-down organizing.

Resistance and Resource Competition

As Meekosha and Shuttleworth explain, many early CDS scholars were reacting to authoritative elements within the social model which tended to deny the realities of certain lived experiences, especially for people with disabilities whose marginalized status and even disability status was also connected to the politics of race, sexuality, and other factors that cannot be accounted for by impairment alone. They describe CDS' concern with constraints being placed on people's experiences and conceptions of disability (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, p. 53). Indeed, similar realizations have led to a burgeoning of scholarship that privileges experiential evidence and embodied knowledge and that is orientated towards intersectional views of oppression. Take, for example, the work of Eli Clare (1999), Licia Carlson (2010), and Nirmala Erevelles (2011). Moreover, a post-humanist feminist approach, as described by Rosi Braidotti (2013), provides a way of thinking about corporeality and the ways in which bodies and impairments are experienced. To say that certain ethical guidelines must be determined, as Vehmas and Watson have done, risks suggesting that one experience of disability must be privileged above another. To state that we require a pre-determined criteria that applies a "reasonable (non-arbitrary)" comparison between different forms of disadvantage to determine resource allocation (Vehmas and Watson, p.6) invites the power of the legislator intellectual to make such determinations.

We can better understand the implications of moral guidance and "concrete viewpoints" (Vehmas and Watson, p. 5) that are based on clear categories of disadvantage through Iris Marion Young's assessment of competing visions of justice. The emphasis on 'correct thinking' and action,

according to Young, reflects a privileging of justice as distribution over justice as empowerment. The first model understands justice as a form of distribution in a consumer-oriented society, wherein passive subjects receive services and support. The second model posits a more action-oriented subject who participates in democratic decision-making in a meaningful way (Young, 1990, pp. 90-91). For Young, justice is primarily concerned with eliminating structures of domination, and this can be done by creating conditions that make it possible to learn and use skills to participate and express individual perspectives. According to this view, the distribution of decision-making power is inseparable from the issue of economic distribution. Young refers to this approach as a communicative ethics (Young, p. 112), and offers it as an alternative to forms of decision-making that project the standpoint of dominant groups as universal. In contrast, "Moral Wrongs" presents justice as "equal chance" (Vehmas and Watson, p. 8), and the associated mode of redistribution overlooks developments in critical legal theory that support a conception of justice as generating equal outcome, rather than opportunity.

The success of equal chance justice is presumably measurable by experts with the 'correct' knowledge. However, such a return to expert-led evaluations does not sit well with disability movements interested in empowerment and self-determination. It is often said that social controls, regulations, and an overarching paternalistic attitude that 'others know best' have negatively affected the lives of people with disabilities by limiting their attempts to exercise autonomy. In response to these tendencies, CDS scholar and activist Marcia Rioux challenges straightforward definitions of equality that avoid theorizing difference. Framing this as a complex legal principle that seeks to compare similarities and differences among individuals (Rioux, 2003, pp. 296-300), she argues that equality relates to even deeper assumptions about identity and human nature. Any discussion of equality, according to Rioux, is forced to make assumptions about human variety and must therefore take into account disability theory's insights into difference. What Vehmas and Watson describe as "the wanton nature of difference"

(Vehmas and Watson, p. 10) is in fact central to the development of social justice models espoused by activists such as Rioux. By complicating equality and positioning this as the goal ('equal outcome') rather than the means ('equal treatment'), Rioux is rejecting liberal claims about a universal human nature.

Her argument that equality has to recognize and accept difference can encourage more equitable outcomes by creating the conceptual space for embodied differences and particular, individual needs. The model of justice she promotes privileges experiential knowledge and undercuts expert knowledge by refusing to establish separate classes of 'differently abled' individuals, and in this regard, Rioux employs some key lessons from postmodern theory towards very practical ends. As Rioux and Fraser Valentine explain, an understanding of social responsibility towards people with disabilities can be traced to a particular perception of the category as a whole (Rioux and Valentine, 2006, p. 50). With this in mind, the ethical mandate proposed in Vehmas and Watson's article reflects a specific conception of social responsibility towards people with disabilities that requires further analysis in relation to the agency of subjects with disabilities.

In contrast to a Habermasian discourse ethics, as promoted by critical theorist Benhabib as "a discursive model of public space" that invites bottom-up participation in ethical debates affecting social change (Malhotra, 2006, p. 82), Vehmas and Watson propose the codification of distinct guidelines without reference to an adequately participatory framework. This project can be understood as an exercise in epistemic authority, with all the attendant effects of elevating non-representative forms of knowledge about disability. Disability knowledge has been a long-standing problem for social modellers and critical disability scholars alike. According to Licia Carlson, critical disability approaches help us understand uneven power relations by facilitating the emergence of "subjugated voices" that question professional sources of knowledge and authority (Carlson, p. 124).

Critical theory has much to offer if our concerns are to remain oriented towards issues of agency that arise from authoritative claims. Rather than limiting our focus to issues of medicine and social services and enhancing access, the moral project of a critical theoretical approach is to contest authoritative claims wherever they arise, especially when these occur within our own movements, thus offering the potential to change the very nature of the supports and services we are trying to obtain. This vigilance is the moral purpose of criticism, and competing views of justice that have emerged within the CDS tradition speak directly to this concern for power dynamics. A closer examination of critical disability critiques helps refute the claim that because CDS "does not examine how things ought to be for disabled people in terms of right and wrong, good and bad," (Vehmas and Watson, p. 1) it fails to provide useful political tools for people with disabilities (Vehmas and Watson, p. 5). Indeed, the practical effects of the critical theoretical analyses described below support a rethinking of support and a more active vision of citizenship. We can now turn to these potential outcomes by considering CDS critiques of service provision.

Corker astutely recognizes that absolutism has the potential to generate social control, even from within movements of oppressed people (Corker, p. 50). Negri's analysis of the co-option of social movements elaborates this idea, explaining that welfare capitalism contains our protest by absorbing our resistance efforts in a way that forces them to contribute to processes of accumulation (Hardt and Negri, 1994, p. 115); in other words, the critical potential of protest is subsumed into the status quo and negated through this process. Commenting on the regulatory role of social citizenship, Negri further argues that moral regulation occurs when "the economic expropriation of the worker can be transformed into a political demand of the citizen" (p. 188). An abundance of literature has been produced on the history of the welfare state through a disability studies lens that applies this social control thesis to interpret the experiences of recipients of disability supports. Parin Dossa's feminist critique of consumer-culture and

industries that exist around disability is especially salient here (Dossa, 2009). Such studies often point out the parasitic function of service coordinators, dating from the rise of the medical, psychiatric, and social service professions to recent iterations of the rehabilitation industry through initiatives that offer community or in-house support. The search for profit and control has been a threat to self-determination and dignity for people with disabilities, and it is one that has been well documented by disability scholars. In a text that is often cited in CDS literature (see for example Carlson, 2010), Young takes up this theme when she argues that the hegemony of the distribution paradigm has contained the debate on oppression, supporting a one-dimensional policy discourse that promotes rationalized control through an expertise that claims to "transcend politics," making it difficult to challenge (Young, p. 80).

Despite a degree of consensus that public spending can also function as a "system of social control" (Hardt and Negri, p. 212), some CDS scholars express the view that it would be too drastic and unhelpful a conclusion to abandon the struggle for increased service provision. Carlson, for example, in her work on the philosophy of intellectual disability, recognizes that impairment can be understood as a construct, but nevertheless acknowledges the usefulness of fixing labels for the purposes of service provision. She points out that in some contexts, diagnostic labels correspond closely to reality, while in others, labels such as intellectual disability are based on socially determined judgements (Carlson, 2010, p. 86). In this regard, a critical view of the welfare state and its divisive categories of eligibility might inspire an approach that does not refute increased provision, but instead questions its motivation: it is this project of questioning which shapes the moral project of critical theory.

Critical disability approaches are well equipped to critique care industries and service sectors, and there is indeed a well-established trend within the literature that rejects political strategies focused on increased service provision alone. Ravi Malhotra and Marta Russell reject this spending solution when they insist that people with disabilities will only have liberation if they can question the very basis

of the rules of the market (Malhotra and Russell, 2002, p. 218). Dating further back, disability activists have been calling for new measures of inclusivity that reject neoliberal conceptions of productivity. Some have approached the question of productivity through feminist historical traditions that question current definitions of work and the role these play in shaping and assessing dependency. Notable in this regard is the foundational work of Paul Abberley (1987), which builds upon on a social model framework but refutes the social model emphasis on access to work as a measure of inclusion. Taking up this thread from a critical disability perspective, Russell defines a form of economic discrimination that is particularly relevant to people with disabilities (Russell, 2001, p. 230), elaborating on the ideas contained in her earlier full-length study (1998). Her intervention recalls the important role that perceptions of productivity play in shaping disability discrimination, reinforcing Negri's insight that productivity is "a valorizing element of the social relation of production" (Hardt and Negri, p. 190). Along these lines, Ellen Meiksins Wood suggests some of the effects that a distributive paradigm shift might have on identity politics when she urges us to think up new ways of regulating social production that go beyond the market or centralized state (Meiksins Wood, p. 289). CDS can encourage this sort of imagining by questioning how discourses of productivity currently shape our identities in relation to social systems and to each other.

In contrast to this critical questioning, Vehmas and Watson's article seems to apply a taken-for-granted notion of productive output, social cost, and disadvantage. Their insistence that disadvantage must be measured verges upon dominant policy trends that consider disability experience as a de-contextualized form of vulnerability. As Eunjung Kim explains, vulnerability is often reified and privatized through normative policies, becoming linked to an individual's 'defective' body rather than to conditions of inequality or injustice (Kim, pp. 138-139). A more complicated understanding of vulnerability challenges popular liberal models of service provision that characterize people with

disabilities as 'in need.' In response to such liberal assumptions one might argue, as Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon do (1994), that all people have needs, though some of these needs are stigmatized within specific historical contexts (p. 315). These stigmatized needs are often administered by the state or other protective bodies in an effort to control what becomes seen as a problem population. Rather than essentializing people with disabilities as needy, a CDS scholar might ask how those needs have been constructed, understood, and administered. This is not to erase the ways in which people with disabilities are excluded from resources necessary for their material survival. Rather, it is to highlight how social exclusion is produced and to ask how this can be changed, thus acknowledging that dominant understandings of disability as inherently needy or vulnerable have a long history in justifying the oppression and marginalization of people with disabilities.

In "Moral Wrongs, Disadvantages, and Disability," the authors promote a form of redistribution, but it is one that is unconcerned with the generation of equal outcome and fails to conceptualize support as a social right. They argue: "Whatever the size, it is an extra cost of employers and to the state" (Vehmas and Watson, p. 10). Such statements may appear to play into the idea of disability as public burden and overlook the struggle by disability activists against interpretations of the costs of their supports as 'extra.' So, while many CDS scholars would agree that service provision assists people with impairments, they might disagree with the framing of this provision as an extra cost to employers and to the state (Vehmas and Watson, p. 10). This interpretation of accommodations as extra cost ought to be contrasted with the popular view among disability activists that the costs of accommodating and supporting individuals are necessary. Framing these costs as special or 'extra' enforces a cost-benefit logic that presumes some measure of productive output. This perspective misses the point that the costs of accommodating and supporting people are entitlements, regardless of productive potential.

A shared focus on productivity helps link critical disability approaches to earlier research undertaken by Abberley (1987), which is often thought to align with a social modelist position. Even though CDS is not the only approach that carries the potential to subvert dominant conceptions of productivity or the more general dominance of the concept, it has been singled out by critics such as Vehmas and Watson because its practitioners sometimes approach this resistance through discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a form of textual analysis, however, that is neither limited to critical disability approaches nor an accurate description of the breadth of these approaches. Nevertheless, some defence of this method's value to disability activism is appropriate here. Discourse analysis allows people with disabilities to consider how oppressive ideologies operate and mobilize the concept of disability to shape their material reality. This is especially true since definitions of disability, as Russell notes, are discursive and flexible, allowing restrictions to be placed on expanding support services by limiting eligibility (Russell, 1998, p. 158). Judith Butler's work (1993) has grounded the relationship between bodies and discourses, demonstrating that subjects who appear to be acting independently are in reality enacting norms that are embodied in discourses (p. 13). Along these lines, Foucauldian theories of governmentality demonstrate that political power is not just to be found in high politics, but in any act that is concerned with peoples' conduct in relation to a norm and that creates knowledge to justify its regulatory power (Nikolas Rose, 2005, p. 7). Hence, Nikolas Rose insists that we must search for power by considering regimes of truth that are based on knowledge claims and how these regimes produce rationalities that act as labels to legitimize specific actions (p. 27). While this method has been criticized for failing to appreciate centralized networks of power (Harvey, p.45), it can certainly be applied to more rooted forms.

Intersectionality and Recent Directions

Determinations of 'greatest need' typically rely on governing rationalities that are bolstered by the epistemic claims of authority figures. While it is understood that needs-based valuations may be helpful and even necessary under certain circumstances, they remain ethically problematic due to their inherent risk of allowing normative discourses and values to adversely shape access. These attempts to measure disadvantage and control access stand in contrast to models which promote universal access. Rather than accepting an approach that leads to competition and fewer resources for everyone, Russell encourages disability activists to remain mindful of broader power dynamics and form alliances with non-disability-specific anti-oppression groups to combat oppressive structures (Russell, 1998, p. 231). Corker makes a similar point in her discussion of the competition between Deaf people and people with hearing impairments for supports. She states that competition between these communities is generated by an evaluation of 'greatest need' that limits access. In her words, "society is exonerated from the outcomes of social control" (Corker, p. 30). Vehmas and Watson refer to Corker but they do not engage with the challenge she has presented to their vision of justice. In fact, "Moral Wrongs, Disadvantages, and Disability" dismisses this perspective by claiming that CDS fails to offer practical tools for political change. The authors implicitly endorse competition between 'oppressions' by advocating for comparison as a tool in allocating "scarce" and "finite" resources (p. 8). By emphasizing the scarcity of these resources rather than challenging the source of this scarcity, this solution fails to challenge existing models of distribution (see Vehmas and Watson, p. 8).

The danger of this tactic, as Russell warns, is that we risk isolating our causes and developing a narrow view of our goals. She seems to anticipate Vehmas and Watson's critique when she explains that disability scholars are often criticized for looking beyond what is defined as their immediate purpose (Russell, 1998, p. 232). In her effort to build common ground, Russell goes beyond this supposed

orthodox concern and identifies another challenge for people with disabilities: balancing a consideration for the universal with an acceptance of differences that replaces single-impairment organisations with broader disability groups (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 32). It is therefore fitting to highlight some of the work that CDS scholars have contributed towards this end. Vehmas and Watson describe the "analysis of [categories of difference] and their historical genealogy" as a purely academic pursuit (Vehmas and Watson, p. 6), but we will see how this method of analysis has helped shaped a framework that is intersectional and inclusive of various experiences of oppression.

The strategies suggested above rely on a critical theoretical view of identity that challenges disability activists to search for common ground with each other and other groups. In her work, Young approached identity based on the lived reality of interlocking oppressions, applying a postmodern view of the subject that acknowledges individuals as "heterogeneous and multiple in our affiliations and desires" (Young, p. 124). A relational and holistic view of oppression is especially important since capitalism, as many have observed, is flexible, allowing oppressive ideas to change or be replaced with new ones (Meiksins Wood, p. 283). Recall that the economic needs of capitalism are often served by different and changing forms of oppression related to disability, sexuality, gender, and other inter-related markers of difference, while obscuring the principle of oppression that links the experiences of these individuals (Meiksins Wood, p. 283). For this reason, disability activists have pointed out that it is important to consider alliances with other excluded people, such as the unemployed, single mothers, and part-time workers (Russell and Malhotra, p. 223). While critical disability orientations may be well-equipped for this task, Meekosha and Shuttleworth's concern that the Global South has not been included in conversations of disability oppression remains pertinent. Such oversights, however, cannot be remedied by a return to a strong categorical identity politics. Within the field, identity politics has

engendered exclusionary and hierarchical strategies based on static views of impairment, thus erasing the realities of many people with disabilities.

Russell warns that identity politics is an approach reflecting "little vision or hope for universal justice" (Russell, 1998, p. 231). She insists that we attempt to forge links with other excluded categories to identify underlying problems, the foremost being the perception of labour as a requirement for membership in society (Russell, 1998, p. 223). Her call for new values reflects the work of Abberley, and both argue for counter-values to those of productivism. Russell insists that these alternatives must be built through alliances, and she poses the challenging question: "can any identity group alone prevail against an economic system which increasingly sheds all those of no use to generating capital?" (Russell, p. 45). Abberley makes a similar point in a 1987 article where he explains that the main concerns surrounding disability for the capitalist state are not necessarily the needs identified by people with disabilities themselves, but instead, how to mitigate the effects that non-working people with disabilities may have on the market economy (Abberley, 1987, p. 16).

Coalition building is nevertheless challenging partly because, as Young observes, interest groups tend to direct their arguments at decision-makers rather than a broader public audience, thus failing to enter into dialogue with other interest groups (Young, p. 186). Furthermore, disability identity is itself complex and intersectional, relating to many subcultures and individuals who identify across multiple groups. Corker ascribes divisions within disability movements to the failure to accept such complexities. This failure is expressed through the binary assignment of values such as good and bad (Corker, p. 18), right and wrong, or those who reject the social model and those who do not. Far from denying the reality of impairment or disability oppression, as Vehmas and Watson fear, critical disability approaches often expand these categories to account for differing lived experiences. This approach can be useful to activists who might otherwise mistake their own experiences of disability as universal. Vehmas and

Watson, perhaps as a result of viewing CDS through the lens of absolutism, appear to have confused this problematization of identity categories with the rejection of these categories altogether; such a rejection would lead to the denial of disability oppression and, as they conclude, it would be "impossible to fight the oppression of a group of people that does not exist" (Vehmas and Watson, p. 11). As we have seen, CDS scholars such as Corker do not necessarily reject disabled/non-disabled distinctions, but instead seek to expand upon the meanings of these divisions to include experiences that were not anticipated or conceptualized by those who initially defined these categories of difference.

Conclusion

In their 2009 article, Meekosha and Shuttleworth ask "whether intersectionality will become a useful tool for CDS" (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, p. 62). This paper has sought to demonstrate that theories of intersectionality have yielded creative and critical scholarship that is particularly relevant to materialist readings of oppression and to disability organizing, though, as is often the case, much work remains to be done. In particular, as prominent CDS scholars have already pointed out (Erevelles, 2011; Meekosha, 2011), the ways in which intersecting oppressions shape disability have been under-theorized, and scholarship has been slow in accounting for the experiences of racialized people with disabilities. An equally important task is the establishment of an intersectional view of disability as an organizing concept. As historians Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky observe, further theoretical applications of disability will help combat the academic as well as social insulation that is only just beginning to be eroded (2001, p. 18).

To contribute to more inclusive practices within disability studies and disability organizing, this article has disputed the compartmentalization and comparison of oppressions. It has argued that such conceptual segregation does not account for the different ways in which people may experience

disability or, more broadly, oppression. The intersectional approach that has been described here is not additive, but simultaneous, intertwined, and reciprocally influential. This paper has repeated the need for disability activists and scholars to consider the ways in which identity politics risk deepening uneven power relations and isolating political experiences. But this is not to reject a disability culture: the promotion of alliance-building does not necessarily lead to the negation of disability cultures and identities, but rather to the recognition that formulations and experiences of disability can take many forms.

In this sense, critical disability approaches have inserted themselves into the longstanding debate around the conceptual borders of impairment and disability, and the potential relationships between the two. By overlooking these contributions, Vehmas and Watson's article inadvertently dismisses a spectrum of traditions that facilitate discussion of the embodied realities of disability and impairment. In response to this critique, this discussion has suggested varying degrees of continuity between critical disability and other approaches, exposing the ongoing relevance of conversations and debates that are occurring within this field and across other disciplines. By resisting hard and fast divisions, we can hopefully avoid the risks of absolute methods that seek to regulate debates around disability, impairment, ableism, and racism, among other experiences, and instead seek to understand their co-construction, and explore fruitful alternatives to resisting their harmful effects.

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