



Disability & Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cdso20>

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Published online: 20 May 2009.

To cite this article: Bill Hughes (2009) Wounded/monstrous/abject: a critique of the disabled body
in the sociological imaginary, *Disability & Society*, 24:4, 399-410, DOI: [10.1080/09687590902876144](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590902876144)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09687590902876144>

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Wounded/monstrous/abject: a critique of the disabled body in the sociological imaginary

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(Received 16 April 2008; final version received 12 August 2008)

Contemporary sociology has made sense of bodily difference by mobilising a number of tropes. 'Wounded' (or vulnerable), 'monstrous' and 'abject' stand out by virtue of their ubiquity though they do not exhaust the repertoire. These categories highlight the conceptual tensions between the sociology of the body and Disability Studies. In this paper, I will examine the value of these tropes to Disability Studies and suggest that while they can help to clarify the processes that bring about the misrecognition of disabled people, understanding the nature and scope of the lives of disabled people in modernity requires a more embodied language rather than one that has been generated from a sociological imaginary that is strongly influenced by a non-disabled subject position in which repulsion for the other – which one must become – is never fully resolved. Disability has had little impact on sociological theories of the body and when sociology ventures into disability it has tended to conflate it with an ontology of human frailty or gloss it with tropes that may be instructive about the generic or gendered modernist structure of exclusion but it tells us little about the specific forms of invalidation experienced by disabled people.

Keywords: disability; impairment; body; vulnerable; monstrous; abject

Introduction

The growing fascination with the body in disability studies can be traced to the mid to late 1990s, when disabled feminists and the sociology of the body met with the social model distinction between impairment and disability and found it wanting (see Hughes 2002a). The linguistic, cultural and somatic turns in western thought have made it difficult for the social model of disability to continue to ignore or be indifferent to the body and impairment. The effort to sustain such an agnostic position has fragmented, particularly as the embodied differences among and between disabled people have become manifest in new social and political aspirations. Bodies matter, most importantly, in our somatic society (Turner 1996, 1) because they no longer function 'outside the internally referential systems of modernity' but have become themselves 'reflexively mobilized' (Giddens 1991, 8). The body became an ineligible subject in social model discourse because the medical model was impairment driven and, thus, represented the terrain of the oppressor. The torrent of appeals to 'bring

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bodies back in' to disability studies (see, for example, Corker 1998; Hughes and Paterson 1997; G. Williams 2001; Turner 2001; Zola 1991) may not have revived the medical model, but it has created opportunities for dialogue between disability studies and the sociology of the body.

This dialogue has been profoundly uneasy because it threatens to undo the distinction between disability and impairment that is at the core of social model thinking. Indeed, in a recent controversial book Tom Shakespeare (2006) challenged social model orthodoxy in a number of domains. The basis of his critique was the argument that the social model distinction between impairment and disability is unsustainable. The well-established tenets of the social model of disability are under fire from claims that stress the importance of embodiment, biology and genetics to contemporary forms of citizenship and identity (Brown et al. 2004; Heath, Rapp, and Taussig 2003; Rose and Novas 2004).

The repertoires of the sociology of the body are becoming entangled with a whole host of issues that impinge upon disability identity. These include biology (Williams, Burke, and Bendelow 2003), health identities (James and Hockey 2006), emotions (S. Williams 2001), biosociality (Rabinow 1996; Gibbon and Novas 2007) and, indeed, the 'politics of life itself' (Rose 2001). This heavy traffic of ideas seems to be searching for some parking space in the terrain occupied by disability studies. In the USA – where disability studies as an academic discipline is embedded in the liberal arts and humanities as well as the social sciences – it is much more open than its UK counterpart to ideas that have been generated by the 'postmodern turn', 'the cultural turn' and the 'somatic turn' (Tremain 2005: Mitchell and Snyder, 1997, 2000; Deutsch and Nussbaum 2000). It is usually at the juncture of disability and feminist postmodernism that tropes like 'the monstrous' and 'the abject' have started to play a role in shaping UK disability studies and we will attend to these imbrications and developments in dedicated sections in the body of the text.

In the UK, where the social model of disability has dominated disability studies, the gates to (our metaphorical) parking area are much less likely to respond favourably to vehicles that are migrating from another territory. This means that the dominion of disability studies is more closed than it is in the USA and this closure makes the terrain much more sharply contested, particularly by sociologists and philosophers, who feel it is time to recognise the 'reality' and universality of impairment, as well as the biological dimensions of the disabled body (Shakespeare 2006; Shakespeare and Watson 2002; Turner 2001). This literature marks a return to ontology and philosophical naturalism in which human frailty and vulnerability provide the means of universalising disability and, thereby, deconstructing its pervasive association with deficit and ontological negativity (Hughes 2007). This argument will be addressed in the first section below.

Wounded

The vulnerable, like many negative or paternalistic appellations for disabled people, acquires its metaphorical power from the tribunal of anatomical perfection against which it is measured. The strong, well-formed, non-disabled, masculine body is the benchmark and against this benchmark a woman is found wanting and a disabled person – man or woman – is weak and vulnerable. Whenever a corporeal universal is used as a benchmark for ontological categorisation the roll call of those who are invalidated is a significant proportion of humanity. This might be described as the roll call

of the 'wounded', of those who become a burden to the healthy legions, keen to march ahead and get on with the business at hand. Bryan Turner (2003, 277) pointed out that the word 'vulnerability' has its roots in the term *vulnus*, meaning wounded. Modern systems of welfare are built on the premise that something must be done for the 'wounded', for those whose days of belonging and contributing fully have come to an end. The wounded are 'deserving'. They cannot be left behind to die. They have lost control of their bodies and require the paternalistic support of a moralised system of social welfare (Dean 1999). In a world dominated by possessive individualism, the vulnerable do not possess themselves and, therefore, must be reinvented as dependent relative to those who are whole and healthy. Bacchi and Beasley (2002, 326) claimed that subjects who are regarded as having control over their bodies are regarded as citizens, whereas 'those reduced to their bodies are constituted as lesser citizens'. Frailty offends, reminding the 'clean and proper body' of the ghosts of the ageing, suffering and affliction that represent its most profound fears. The vulnerable, disabled body 'exposes the illusion of autonomy, self-government and self-determination that underpins the fantasy of absolute able-bodiedness' (Thomson 1997, 45).

Ideas about frailty and vulnerability in disability studies that were introduced by Irving Zola (1989) were banished by the rise of the social model in the 1980s and 1990s. The social model shifted the debate about disability away from biology and bodies. Disability was redefined as a form of social oppression (Oliver 1990) and matters of embodiment were dismissed as remnants of reaction or left-over's from the bad old days of medical hegemony. The social model distinguished between impairment and disability. It focused on the latter and excluded the former from sociological debate. The fleshy issue of impairment was, in effect, conceded to medicine (Hughes and Paterson 1997). However, 'the wounded' and their bodies have once again found a place in disability discourse (Seymour and Lupton 2004, 291). Wendy Seymour (1998, 179–80) put 'frailty and vulnerability' at the 'heart of her study' of rehabilitation and embodiment and argued that the 'fragmented, frail, damaged and leaking bodies' of her disabled informants provide case studies 'in novel acts of re-embodiment'. More recently, Bryan Turner (2001, 2003) and Tom Shakespeare and Nick Watson (2002) have argued – following Irving Zola (1989) – that disability studies should adopt a universalist ontology of disability. The grounds for this claim are that impairment is the fate of each and every one of us and, therefore, it is important to recognise that able bodied status is essentially temporary. Turner (2001, 262) argued that 'frailty is a universal condition of the human species', which suggests that 'the ubiquity of impairment is an empirical fact not a relativist claim' (Shakespeare and Watson 2002, 27), and Shakespeare and Watson (2002, 27) claimed that there 'is no qualitative difference between disabled people and non-disabled people, because we are all impaired'. Once we are all subsumed into the universal category of impairment, disability studies is compelled to distinguish – as Shakespeare (1994) suggested – between those who are oppressed and those who are not. Disability identity therefore hinges on a question of political recognition, on who can successfully claim that they are unfairly treated as a consequence of a substantial somatic or intellectual difference.

The position taken by Turner (2001) and Shakespeare and Watson (2002), in which vulnerability is universal and frailty the fate of all, suggests, in Timpanaro's (1975, 20) words, 'a common morality, based on the solidarity of all men [sic] in the struggle against nature'. The common morality derived from the essential ontological identity of all, egalitarian though it is, seems to me to be unable to escape from the problem of biological reductionism, a charge that is regularly levelled at the medical

model of disability. Not only does the category of disability disappear into the universal siblinghood of our wounded lives – lives inevitably tarnished by physical and mental limitation – but also the issues of exclusion, discrimination and oppression that are associated with a disabled identity become superfluous. They can no longer be constituted as experiences of specific political import to disabled people. If we are all fragile/wounded, ergo disabled, then either all or none of us are oppressed, and if it is the former, then perhaps we can be content with our poor but equal treatment. It may be ‘good for the soul’ to admit to ourselves that we are, or one day might become, the other that we (once) despised, but such moral clarity is unlikely to improve disabled people’s standard of living or bring down the barriers that exclude them from participation in social and economic life. Furthermore, the appeal to vulnerability as an essence of being human should be rejected on the grounds that it is an attempt ‘to normalise disability at an anthropological level by invoking the empirical universality of impairment’, where impairment finds itself thrust into a ‘sociological limbo dominated by a pre-social notion of life as limit’ (Hughes 2007, 679). One can appreciate that the emphasis placed on the natural limits of the body is an attempt to ward off the crass relativism of strong forms of social constructionism, but even if one is sympathetic to the backlash against postmodernism, there is a mistake inherent in the argument that makes disabled people of us all. It assumes that because the body declines and calls time on everyone, it is the perfect example of that which is beyond discourse and represents the final moment when human matter reveals itself unambiguously as nothing but nature. However, it is important to argue that, despite its vulnerability, the body’s materiality is indeterminate and its limits negotiable (James and Hockey 2007). Furthermore, the body is not just a limit. It also embodies a set of possibilities. It is clear that the disabled body is ubiquitously represented in negative ontological terms and its limitation and deficits dominate the literature. It is difficult to escape the representation of the disabled life as doomed and tragic or to avoid the melancholia that surrounds non-disabled people’s accounts of disabled people’s lives. To make disabled people of us all adds pessimism to essentialist naturalism. Would it not be better – as recent proponents of the ‘rhizomatic’ potential of people with learning disabilities have done (Goodley 2007; Braidotti 2002) – to admit that all of us, disabled or not, are bursting with possibilities and capabilities? In the universalist discourse ‘lack’ haunts us all. For those who embrace the tropes of monstrosity and abjection ‘lack’ is a status reserved for disability.

Monstrous

In *Embodying the monster: Encounters with the vulnerable self* Margrit Shildrick (2002) deconstructed the ways in which the autonomous and unitary male subject of modernity is constructed as the epitome of normative existence. The dark side of this glowing representation is that it constitutes women and disabled people as the vulnerable/monstrous other. Frailty or vulnerability, in Shildrick’s view, is not an intrinsic quality of organic existence but is better understood as an ‘inalienable condition of becoming’ (Shildrick 2002, 85). Shildrick (2002, 106) argued that the modernist paradigm of subjectivity ‘has no room for corporeal being that is either uncontrollable or less than perfect. It is a model that disavows existential vulnerability’ and treats disabled people and women as representative of the alterity that the masculine logos uses to confirm its own integrity. This disingenuous move on the part of the male, validated subject of modernity, however, not only incites sympathy, and loathing for

the other, but reveals the basic vulnerability of unimpaired being or, to use Kristeva (1982, 71) and Shildrick's preferred terminology, the fragility of the 'clean and proper body'. The normal or non-disabled body/self is not empirical but normative, an ideal of being, manifest in 'modernist ontology, epistemology and ethics' as that which is 'secure, distinct, closed and autonomous' (Shildrick 2002, 51). It is a 'body schema, a psychic construction of wholeness that ... belies its own precariousness and vulnerability' (Shildrick 2002, 79).

This argument recommends itself to a critical social ontology for disability studies (Hughes 2007). It problematises non-disablement (the 'clean and proper' body) and exposes it as myth and fantasy, a normative haven into which those who want to put distance between themselves and the 'flawed stranger' flee. Shildrick's book is essentially a deconstructionist quest for an embodied ethics that does not efface the other by reducing her to the same, and as her quest gains momentum she draws on the work of Derrida – who 'haunts the whole book like the spectres he invokes' (Shildrick 2002, 7) – and others who help in her search for ethical becoming in the world with others (Price and Shildrick 2002) in which even the most radical difference is recognised and celebrated rather than erased. Shildrick opened her arms to welcome in the promise of monstrosity. She argued for a perspective that transposes the problem of the monster from the monster per se to the fears of the monster that stalk the orderly and coherent world of the symbolic. Firstly, the monster fulfils 'the necessary function of the binary opposite that confirms the normality and centrality of the accultured self'. Secondly, it threatens 'to disrupt that binary by being all too human' (Shildrick 2000, 81). At stake in this claim is the hubris of the non-disabled imaginary and the bad faith of the non-disabled self that fails to see 'his' likeness in the differences from which 'he' recoils in horror.

However, there is an incipient problem with this position. Shildrick is a radical deconstructionist, sympathetic to Derrida's argument that language registers only difference and has no fixed positions (Howson 2005, 86), and she adds that the body exhibits the same kind of instability and fluidity. For Shildrick (1997) the body is 'leaky' and its boundaries are elusive.

Once, however, it is admitted that both social and biological bodies are not given but exist only in the constant process of historical transformation, then there are only hybrid bodies, vulnerable bodies, becoming bodies, cyborg bodies; bodies, in other words, that always resist definition both discursive and material. (Shildrick 2002, 121)

Most deconstructionists admit to nothing – or not much of substance – beyond the discursive, such that objects do not have any real or autonomous existence beyond their construction in language. This means, as Gergen (1994) put it, that constructionism is 'ontologically mute' [sic]. Neither the 'monstrous bodies' nor the 'clean and proper bodies' that inhabit Shildrick's work are carnal figures. Shadows – not monsters – haunt the pages of this brilliant book. Its subjects are lifeless, like the preserved scientific specimens in the teratological exhibitions that the author uses as data to illustrate some of her fascinating arguments. Vulnerability and monstrosity are words rather than conditions of existence. In particular, they are words used by the 'clean and proper' not only to register the presence of the alien other, but also – once the hidden act of projection is unmasked – provide a text that describes those very non-disabled agents that authored the accusations of monstrosity. It is a curious irony that in the very historical moment when disabled people are making a collective effort to demonstrate their ontological validity that some forms of social theory (sometimes

used to shed light on disabled peoples lives) are built on an effort to make fiction out of the ontological status of the subject. In this vein, Siebers (2001, 740) argued that 'social constructionism either fails to account for the difficult physical realities faced by people with disabilities or presents their body in ways that are conventional, conformist or unrecognisable to them'.

In a critique of the position that Shildrick adopted in an earlier book, Howson (2005, 88) argued that Shildrick's 'focus on sexual difference through embodiment, ethics and discourse is pitched much too abstractly to offer the kind of specificity warranted by the valorisation of corporeality. As a result, it obscures what it seeks to make visible – embodied specificity'. In *Embodying the monster* Shildrick tried to valorise a specific form of corporeality, namely that which is monstrous and vulnerable. She appealed to femininity and disability as the primary source, not only of resistance to the masculine subject of modernity but also of the promise of a future of bodily becoming – ennobled by Derrida's monstrous *arrivant* – in which hybrid, liminal or boundary figures will destabilise and replace the (mythical) coherent, universal, pre-discursive, subject. Shildrick (2002, 122) hoped that in this new world in which the fixed and the proper have no place, where gender is undercut 'as a foundational category' or repositioned 'as a discursive construct always open to re-signification' that the feminine will not disappear but 'rather re-emerge as the radically other'. While there are clear problems common to post-structural feminism in this argument, including relativism and a tendency to take concepts 'out of every conceivable context of significant use' that turns them 'into metaphysical entities that no longer respond to any specific criteria of meaning' (Moi 2005, vii), there is also a specific problem about disability as an issue and a subject position. Shildrick can envisage the re-emergence of new radical forms of femininity even in a world devoid of any fixtures or foundations, but disability as a subject position has no light whatsoever to give it shape or form. This is not a Utopian reference to the disappearance of disability qua oppression, but an oversight. Firstly, *Embodying the monster*, like Shildrick's previous book *Leaky bodies and boundaries*, is primarily about women. Disability barely registers as a subject position at all and is a shadow in the presence of the feminine and the feminist philosophy and ethics that mark its primary intellectual register. Secondly, the categories of monstrosity and vulnerability have, in the text, no specific meaning in relation to physical impairment or disability. This is ironic, given that disabled people, regardless of gender, are, in the course of everyday interaction, much more likely than women to be treated as if they are 'ontologically flawed' and to experience the personal violation that such a negative reception embodies. Shildrick did not discuss the violence done to disabled people by a great many of their non-disabled counterparts who, all too often, fail to recognise the biological, psychological and social 'sisterhood' between disabled and non-disabled people. Shildrick is more concerned with monstrosity at the level of language and representation and the way that it can be used to discursively disturb the normative, invulnerable, masculine subject of modernity and to throw mud at 'his' 'clean and proper and body'. Some of the mud sticks, and the text certainly unsettles the epistemological authority of the male subject, but it reveals little concrete about being disabled or about how to use the ontological question to enhance the cause of disabled people.

Furthermore, it is important to make it clear that teratology cannot provide a major point of intellectual access into disability studies. The voyeuristic fascination with monstrosity – common amongst enlightenment philosophers like Diderot – sits uneasily with the celebration of difference and is wed to a dialectic of lack (Braidotti 2002).

In its occularcentricity it embraces the aesthetics of the low budget horror movie and relies crudely for its intellectual traction on the visual shock of extreme 'cases' of bodily 'malformation'. The teratological imagination admits as data only that which can be classified as extreme or exotic. It is, therefore, the epistemological equivalent of the 'freak show', unable to shed light, for example, on those many millions of disabled people without visually apparent impairments who may attempt to live their lives by 'passing as normal' (Goffman 1978).

Abject

The theory of abjection is associated primarily with the work of Julia Kristeva (1982). The abject constitutes a threat to life, to identity and order. It is a source of horror and repulsion that 'must be excluded from the place of the living subject' (Creed 1993, 65), a sort of 'return of the repressed' that must be returned to the 'no man's land' from whence it came. That which is uncomfortable – or more precisely impossible – to face and threatens to bring about the collapse of meaning or challenges the coherence of the clean and proper body is commensurate with the abject. The abject is 'the recognition of the impossible but necessary transcendence of the subject's corporeality and the impure defiling elements of its uncontrollable materiality' (Grosz 1990, 87–8). It has some affinity with the idea of the taboo, with Sartre's (1966) concept of 'the slimy' (*le visqueux*) and with Mary Douglas's (1980) analysis of dirt as 'matter out of place' (Cregan 2006) and is most closely associated with Georges Bataille's (1985) concept of 'formlessness' (*l'informe*). All of these concepts refer to a realm that is impure, unclean and disorderly to a murky, disavowed world that threatens propriety and identity. The abject finds expression in affronts to the 'civilised' human condition, including incest, cannibalism, human sacrifice, perversion, monstrosity, infection, disease, decay, death and the waste products of the body, all those substances and fluids that might pass from the inner to the outer body and that embody the capacity to disgust and repel.

Modernity may have made a meal of trying to 'civilise' corporal waste and flows and other threats to ontological security, but Kristeva's (1982) point is that the abject is never fully expelled. It remains part of the subject, repressed, denied but lurking, hovering, whispering barely audibly from some liminal place in the recesses of the imaginary. It gnaws at the coherence and stability of identity. It is as if the chaos and incoherence of the pre-linguistic stage of infancy or what Kristeva, invoking Plato's distinction between form and matter, called the *chora* – despite innumerable attempts to make it go away – has retained a presence in the orderly realm of the symbolic. It is this, the threat of which one is barely aware, a stalker lurking in the shadows of existence, that animates the concept of abjection. The abject is 'what disturbs, identity, system and order ... that which 'does not respect, boundaries, positions, rules: The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva 1982, 4). The abject is governed by a 'process metaphysic' because it 'privileges the living, moving, pulsing, over the dead matter of the Cartesian world view' (Young 1990). It is also transgressive. It comes from a place of prohibition and taboo (like the horror of the corpse) and, therefore, embodies a challenge to the symbolic order that will, invariably, be met head on and forcefully by the battalions that represent purity and power.

Most importantly – in the heartlands of non-disability – the abject is a cause for concern because it is too close for comfort. The normative guise of domesticated propriety, all that is 'clean and proper', is a cosmetic reality, one that has been bathed

and manicured and tidied up. All the grooming and preening are testimony to a body that is nowhere as perfect as it seems. The battle against the abject is a permanent. Life wages it upon the 'civilised', cultured, public face that we are expected to take with us when we play at being in the world. The abject is (some of) what we are but will not admit to because decorum and decency – those pristine twins that make civilization so discontented – demand that we adhere to the 'law of the father'. It is the stranger that we despise but fear we might become. It is the whisper of disruption that we would rather ignore in case it draws us in and dissolves us in its horrors. It manifests itself as a form of embodied civility behind which lurks the spectre of Kierkegaardian dread. Susan Wendell (1997, 268) argued that this dynamic of 'othering' that clears away the immediacy of the abject mirrors the way in which non-disabled people deal with the psychological threat of disability. Disabled people 'are constant reminders to the able-bodied of the negative body – of what the able-bodied are trying to avoid, forget and ignore'.

Embodied civility has a price that is paid on a daily basis by disabled people, particularly those with visible impairments who experience the unremitting, pathologising violence of the non-disabled gaze (Hughes 1999). No one gets an ASBO for the everyday violations experienced by disabled people because little recognition is given to 'the profound oppressions of everyday life' and to the ways in which the disabled body is routinely and ubiquitously 'stunned into its own recognition by its presence-as-alien-being-in-the-world' (Paterson and Hughes 1999, 603). The propensity of the (so-called civil) interaction order to discriminate against carnal difference is a measure of how the abject in all of us is projected onto the few and how what Young (1990) called the 'meshes of micro-authority' help to demean and exclude disabled people. As the US scholar Tobin Siebers (2001, 739) put it: 'people easily perceive when someone is different from them but rarely acknowledge the violence of their perception'.

Though it has a pedigree of some distinction in feminist literature (see, for example, Grosz 1994; Fletcher and Benjamin 1990) and has played a significant role in some sociological studies of the body (Cregan 2006; S. Williams 2001), the concept of the abject has had little impact on disability studies. It has been used at the margins of disability discourse, for example by Shildrick (2001) in her thesis on monstrosity (discussed above) and by Hughes et al. (2005) in a comparative piece on approaches to care in the feminist and disability movements. In this view the care dyad is mediated by the excremental and, therefore, places the parties involved in it in a feminised relationship that struggles for recognition in a world dominated by the masculine imaginary. However, gender is the master [sic] point of reference in the discourse of abjection and no matter how hard one tries to put it to work for disability studies, it always feels like a tool invented for another purpose. Let me try to explain this critique by way of a minor detour.

In the same way that the category of monstrosity helps one to think critically of 'the clean and proper body', the category of abjection disrupts normative and dominant representations of embodiment, leaving one with the distinct impression that the 'civilised body' is not all that it seems. In the bold binaries of modernity, like 'the normal and the pathological', there is no symmetry. The former is ontologically valorised and the latter indicative of lack and deficit. The hegemony of the former is never in question, whilst those who may be categorised as abnormal will face questions about their worth. In postmodern thinking there is a radical switch of values from the normative centre to the excluded margin and a valorisation of the latter such that the

former cannot claim all that is legitimate and potent with respect to human existence. In this way the process of 'othering' is unmasked, the injustices of representation are exposed and the possibilities of liminality and hybridity are uncovered. Yet, although we can see how strangers are made, we are not altogether clear exactly who they are and they are still mired in a dialectic of 'lack'. What specific form of abjection or othering is experienced by disabled people and do we need specific categories to reflect the particulars of this experience? I suspect the answer to both of these questions is yes and that disability studies needs a narrative of 'invalidation' to describe the historical, social, cultural and biographical processes that transform impairment into disability and that simultaneously, erect a 'valid' form of embodiment that will not admit to (although it lives in fear of) the 'tragedy' that it might become.

Concluding remarks

What I find most interesting in examining the value of the wounded, the monstrous and the abject as tropes that might contribute to debates about the body and embodiment in disability studies is the way in which all three metaphors point, inexorably, to the need to disrupt the normative, modern ideal of the body, particularly because of the powerful role that it plays in the processes that marginalise and invalidate certain categories of people by constructing them as threats and strangers (Hughes 2002b). The idea of vulnerability, however, in the way it has been pressed into service of late by disability theorists, opts for a strategy of disruption that not only collapses the disability/impairment binary – much loved by social model theorists – but also resolves the question of corporeal difference between disabled and non-disabled people by abrogating it. The invulnerable normative – probably masculine – body of modernity is then replaced by its opposite. The fragile, disabled, vulnerable body becomes both statistical norm and human universal and disability is transformed from a minority status into the natural, defining feature of human kind. It is to our natural limits, apparently, that we must look in order to recognise what it is that we share – in essence – with others. This position marks the antithesis of the post- or late modern obsession with bodily perfection. Yet this is not enough. If one argues that 'impairment is the rule', as the thesis of vulnerability contends, one also has to add, as Lennard Davis (2002, 30) did, that 'normalcy is the fantasy'. At least, in the appeal to 'monstrosity' and 'abjection' one finds a clear vindication of this latter claim. Yet even as this clever 'dismodernist' slogan problematises non-disability, it leaves aside the question of who qualifies as a disabled person; if we all do, by virtue of the universality of impairment, then we must lock the door to identity politics. Does this mean that we must seek means to restore the now impossibly blurred disabled subject and, if so, what means are available? It is only in the borderlands where impairment and oppression meet that we will find a resolution and between the 'rule of impairment' and the 'fantasy of normalcy' we will need to interpolate a new subject that is both impaired and oppressed. I think that this might be a convoluted journey back to a place that disability studies has already been.

At least the postmodern tropes – monstrosity and abjection as they have been outlined in this paper – invite one to enter a world in which two constructed bodies – one at the normative centre of representation and the other in the shadows, at the edge – disturb one another by virtue of their discursive intimacy. We can also be assured that the relation between the two will be such that the more powerful, perhaps hegemonic representation will be deconstructed by the irritating presence of its subaltern¹

category which will, in the final analysis, portray its putative categorical superiority as a fake and a fraud, a fantasy of embodiment that 'exists' only to mask the fear and insecurity of non-disabled subjects. These are valuable arguments that will be recognised by disabled people. However, the same disruption of non-disabled identity can be achieved by another route. Disability studies recognises the category of 'tragedy' as the trope that most readily illustrates the ways in which non-disabled people relate to and understand disabled people's lives (see, for example, Kumari Campbell 2005; Oliver 1990). The assumption that disability invariably constitutes a negative ontology is, consequently, thoroughly embedded in the embodied relations between disabled and non-disabled people and the many vexations of life are projected by the latter onto the former. One might expect mainstream sociology to pay a little more attention to this contemporary rebirth of tragedy, but to date this has not been the case. Tragedy, however, is not a panacea either. While it puts the 'fantasy of normalcy' in the spotlight, it suggests that relations between disabled and non-disabled people are mediated, almost exclusively, by the emotion of pity. This is simply not so. The role of fear – partly alluded to here – through the categories of abjection and monstrosity – and embedded in most 'disavowal' arguments that regard disability as the repressed opposite of normality – is hugely underplayed in personal tragedy theory. So too is the role of disgust, a mediating emotion in the relations between disabled and non-disabled people that is in need of considerable development. In this respect, the trope of abjection represents the best possibility. On a final note, it is important to point out that while tropes offer significant advantages in the development of the epistemological and ontological dimensions of disability and impairment, their locus in the domains of the imaginary and the symbolic makes them potentially dangerously neglectful of the painful material realities of exclusion and oppression that are the ubiquitous bedfellows of disability.

Note

1. The concept of the subaltern has not had much influence in disability studies. There are two aspects of it which appeal. It refers to a minority that is in a position to subvert the hegemonic group and it recognises that the presence of the subaltern is central to the self-definition of the majority. It therefore confers agency on the (subaltern as) other and avoids the dialectic of lack by validating the minority socially and ontologically.

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