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**Comment from the field**  
**Worthington, N.**

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## Comment from the Field

**Disability Futurity Seminar Series,  
Centre for Culture and Disability Studies, Liverpool Hope University**

**Nina Worthington**  
[michelle@worthers.com](mailto:michelle@worthers.com)

The Disability Futurity series was organised by the Centre for Culture and Disability Studies at Liverpool Hope University in collaboration with Carleton University's Disability Research Group in Canada. Six seminars hosted in Liverpool were delivered between September 2019 and February 2020, inviting scholars to explore the shape, possibility, and challenge of disability in the future.

Opening the seminar series, Helen Davies's (Newman University) paper, "Reading Down Syndrome: Past, Present, Future?" explored the imagined futures of disabled people. Framed in the context of the 2018 introduction of non-evasive pre-natal testing via the NHS and associated media debate surrounding feminist rights and agency, she considered this a crucial moment for thinking about the future of people with Down syndrome. Perceiving Down syndrome as a feminist issue, Davies set out how the futures of characters with Down syndrome are constructed in contemporary women's writing. Drawing on examples from Doris Lessing's novel *The Fifth Child* (1998) and Colleen Faulkner's *Just Like Other Daughters* (2013), troubling Victorian medical discourses were noted as largely unchallenged in contemporary fiction. Davies demonstrated how legacies of nineteenth century ideologies on gender and sexuality inform a "pessimistic" imagined future of people with Down syndrome today; she also considered this approach to reading Down syndrome in literature "a critical cul-de-sac". As such, discussion moved on from how "pseudo-scientific" perceptions of people with Down syndrome shape fictional characters that are asexual, affectionately inappropriate, vulnerable, and "fade" from a plot so that "the future of the normal triumphs". Instead, Davies offered alternative readings of Down syndrome from experimental

contemporary fiction. Quoting Jessie Ball's novel *Census* (2018), she argued that aesthetic and political innovation deployed in narrative also imagines futures of people with Down syndrome that are defined by "agency, dignity, and inclusion". With optimistic possibilities for multidimensional characters with Down syndrome emerging in contemporary fiction, Davies concludes with hope for a future where authors with Down syndrome write their own novels and characters accurately reflect their real-life stories.

In the seminar "Art Education and Disability Futurity: Subjects on the Edge" Claire Penketh (Liverpool Hope University) suggested how future art education might be more fully informed by disability. Stemming from a larger project exploring parallel histories of art education and disability from 1830 to the present, she highlighted how the "unfruitful separation" of the histories of arts education and disability "can limit imagination for a world that differs from our own". *Art, education, and disability* were defined as ideas separate yet related, understood as: art + education + disability; art + education = disability; and disability arts = education. Mapping a shift to governmental control of arts education in the nineteenth century, capitalist industrialisation was set out as the defining context for art education and disability. John Ruskin's work was described as emphasising observation as *the* way of knowing and understanding the natural world. Noting David Bolt's work, Penketh stated "the role of vision, an ocular-centrality and 'ocular normativity', started to take hold". Local histories from the Royal School for the Blind, established in Liverpool in 1791, were read alongside these histories of arts education in which disability is largely absent; in this setting, with an emphasis on design and technical training, "craft work dominated as a means of occupation". These histories were exposed as, "parallel rather than intersected, resulting in the emergence and reinforcement of art education as a system of ableist practices".

Thinking about how we bring this past to the future, we were asked "how can art education learn from bodyminds when they are not present?" 2019 statistics from the Department of

Education highlighted the increase in young people with “so-called special educational needs, with eight thousand outside education”. Penketh argued that educational structures are pushing art and disability to the edge but offer a “landscape of art education” with dystopian and utopian possibilities. Dystopian futures were described as valuing “particular types of ability and productivity” over others, a “mainstream education [...] damaging and hostile to teachers as well as pupils”. In this future, definition of ability in art education continues to reinforce an idea that creative practice is for a select few. In contrast, a utopian future was characterised with practice informed by “acceptance of disability” that “enriches and complicates notions of the aesthetic” (Siebers 3). In this future she explained, “art is acknowledged as a way of being [...] inclusive of, and learning from, diverse experience and representations; art is open to, and with, the other”. This future, we were left believing, exists somewhere in an art room “when an art teacher questions a definition of ability that conflicts with her philosophy of arts and her openness to enriched and complicated notions of an aesthetic”.

Ana Bê’s (Liverpool Hope University) paper, “Disabled People and Subjugated Knowledges: New Understandings and Strategies Developed by People Living with Chronic Conditions”, promoted the role of embodied knowledge in the context of disability futurity. Based on her empirical study conducted in England and Portugal, she asked what it means to consider knowledge gained and enacted by disabled people in a world where disability continues to be framed as problematic, “*only* loss”, and “personal tragedy”. Illustrating this dominant understanding in society, Bê shared her lived experience of negotiating what should have been a straightforward hotel booking. Perceiving this as an everyday “mis-encounter”, she pointed to non-disabled people’s “inability to listen” to disabled people’s understanding of impairment or access needs. Although acknowledging worth in disability studies’ historical mapping of disablism and barriers in society, she argued more complex disability

understandings value the “strategies” and “crip-specific” knowledges of disabled people, which often go “unnoticed”, “subjugated by ableism and capitalism”.

Recognising authors Jenny Morris and Liz Crow, and disability arts, as offering alternative routes to “considering bodies and minds”, she explained “the dismissal of disabled people’s experiences constitutes knowledge lost [and...] unshared”. As such, “people who encounter impairment or illness for the first-time are ill-equipped [...] to deal with this experience”, presented only with a false sense of what she terms “normative corporality”. Demonstrated through real-life accounts of participants with chronic illness in her own study, Bê showed how disabled people are “taking responsibility for their lives and wellbeing”, “developing and enacting strategies”, and “negotiating embodiment changes with others”. She considered this wealth of knowledge and strategies to “demonstrate a sophisticated engagement with the body”, challenging our culture’s “very binary understanding of illness and wellness”. In conclusion, Bê asserted that new understanding of illness must come to the fore, “one that understands illness as a kind of loss, but also as a command of something important, a person’s bodymind”.

Stuart Murray’s (University of Leeds) keynote presentation for the D4D Futurity event at Liverpool Hope University was titled “Disability, Posthumanism and Technological Futures”. Key technological advances were described alongside critical ethical concerns regarding access to future technology. Royal Society report of 2019, *iHuman Perspectives: Neural interfaces*, was highlighted as a valuable resource in considering these. Echoing Robert McRuer’s words, he asked “what might it mean to shape worlds capable of welcoming the disability to come?” (207). Murray’s knowledge of cultural texts, fiction and films, guided us through the “many ideas of future disabilities”. Images from X-Men and Ramez Naam’s *Nexus* novels provided examples of “striking technology”, wheelchairs as “fantastic objects”, and what Murray terms “posthuman technoableism”. Considering an “obsession with bodies

[...] moving towards humanist conclusions” in these texts and Pramod Nayar’s views on Posthumanism, Murray positioned the idea of “productive posthuman possibilities”. He suggested this is beneficial in considering “the interface of body and machine [...] and disability reading of a body” in the future.

Drawing upon Alison Kafer’s writing, prejudices behind the idea that “the majority culture all wants a future without disability” were acknowledged. However, with a focus on “materiality of the body” and understanding of “the productive nature of bodily excess”, we were led to conceive “a relationship between the development of engineering technologies and the understanding of disabled agency”. In closing, examples from science fiction were offered as “a vital source for understanding advances in technology and its impact on newly emerging embodiment and subjectivity”. Plot and characters in the *Wayfarers* series by Becky Chambers illustrated a “desired notion of an intersectional future, the disability-led confirmation of what a disability body in an environment might be”. Finally, we were asked to reconsider how we might aspire to optimistic thinking about what a disability future with technology might be and our way of “welcoming the disability to come” (McRuer 207).

Aesthetic appreciation of difference in a future world was also expanded upon by Mike Gulliver (University of Bristol) in the seminar, “Living as if We Already Know What ‘Human’ Will Be: Exploring the Anticipated Futures of Visual/Deaf Humanity and How They Shape the Present.” Focusing on diverse voices amongst the deaf community, a post-deaf world was acknowledged as celebrated by many; an idealism he suggested is already anticipated by policy makers. Gulliver described technologies available to “help” deaf people as assuming a choice to become “hearing and speaking people”. The notion of post-deafness was likened to environmental politics, to degrowth and a necessity to reengage with biodiverse ecology of our planet. Gulliver reminded us of tensions between our “agency to keep the future open to visions of disability” and the “inertia of the ‘inevitable’”. Attention

moved to the Deaf community's celebration of natural sign languages and unique signed cultures as the "global heritage of a visual form of humanity". This, he argued, renders any vision of post-deafness to represent a narrowing of humanity, offering a less diverse, less creative, and less 'human' future.

The final seminar of the Disability Futurity series was titled "The Role of Risk in Relation to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)". Sharon Smith (University of Birmingham) teamed her PhD research with experiences parenting a child with Down syndrome to present ideas around risk and their impact on students' future outcomes. She explained dominant discourses relating to risk assume students with SEND are more vulnerable, that their well-being may be impacted by others response to them, and safety might be compromised by a lack of specialist support. Smith's real-life experiences offered insight into how perceived risks are mitigated in school settings, giving context her argument that "education for disabled children and children with Special Educational Needs should be more risky". Drawing upon the work of Gert Biesta, efforts towards "risk-free" education were raised as a concern resulting in education that is "limiting or exclusionary or both".

Outlining changes in SEN Code of Practice from 2001 to 2014, Smith described how educators are not only asked to consider progress a child is making but "what progress they may or may not make in the future" based on potential risk of underachievement. She claimed this "is not only attempting to control children in their actuality today but [...] to control what they might become", and that "risk" management has "replaced need". Reiterating Ewald's view that "there is no such thing as an individual risk" (203), Smith suggested risks are "determined by what we think is either dangerous or unwanted in our society" and "the label of *special needs* and *at risk* are often synonymous". Pressing for a more ethical approach to education for children with SEND, her concluding thoughts centred on a necessity for educators and parents to "put themselves in a position to receive and welcome the Other in

their alterity”. In this way, *they* risk being “challenged and discredited” by rejecting attempts to predict, comprehend, or “contain” the future of children with SEND, and embracing a “different way of [...] conceiving what the future could look like”.

These six seminars shaped and challenged perceptions of disability futurity towards agency, dignity, and inclusion. Each speaker promoted a future that values multidimensionality, where histories, technological advances, policies, and lived experiences of disability are intersected, listened to, and learnt from. Creating this future requires each of us to reimagine our own definition of ability, philosophy, and openness to complexity and nuanced disability understandings. In this way, ‘welcoming the disability to come’ is not about managing risk or neat solutions, but about vast mysteries we must unfold and embrace (McRuer, 2007).

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## Bio

Nina Worthington recently completed a PhD at Liverpool Hope University, receiving a studentship award from Newman University. Her thesis is titled “What are the Lived Experiences of Theatre Practice and Disability Among Professional Directors and Actors in Theatres Funded by Arts Council England? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis”. Her findings propose stages in a process of engagement with theatre practice and disability for actors and directors, capturing steps towards routine and accurate onstage representation of disabled people. With over 16 years employment in media and community theatre before studying Drama and a MRes in Directing, Nina wants to share her work in ways that might impact policy, practice, and open discussion around disability in arts education settings and workplaces. Supported by activity within Centre for Culture and Disability Studies (CCDS) at Liverpool Hope University whilst studying, Nina is pleased to present her paper “How Might the Pandemic Promote Increased Engagement with Disability in Theatre?” in its upcoming seminar series.