

Editorial: Thinking with Decolonial Disability Studies:**Invitation to the Special Themed Issue**

Xuan Thuy Nguyen¹, Shilpaa Anand², Alexis Padilla³

¹ Carleton University,

² BITS Pilani Hyderabad Campus,

³ University of Missouri Saint Louis

In “Thinking with disability studies,” a provocative statement on the epistemic terrains of disability studies, published in *Disability Studies Quarterly* in 2014, Nirmala Erevelles invites readers into the “eternally changeable borderlands” of disability studies, challenging us to critically reflect on conventional boundaries of disability theorizing. Foregrounding her historical material analyses of disability at the intersections of other marginalized oppressive categories and social relations, Erevelles (2014) urges readers to move beyond disability/crip/queer politics by situating disability theory and praxis at the intersections of seemingly opposing and complicated domains of social inquiry. She argues for a more accountable approach which re-imagines disability futures in specific historical contexts – something she endeavors to call a “living theory.” As she unequivocally states: “I do not want to dream of a future that is more edgy, more abstract, more dazzling. Instead, I want to end [this essay] by dreaming about a future that is simply more accountable” (n.p.).

Traversing these borderlands ten years later, we are convinced Erevelles’ argument continues to hold its original force by provocatively and powerfully challenging disability scholars to push the conventional boundaries of disability studies as an epistemic and

political terrain that welcomes new ways of disruption, transgressiveness and transformation of Western disability studies. Like Erevelles, we take the very essence of disability studies to be a constant interrogation and disruption of normative assumptions and standards. We concur with Goodley and his colleagues, who posit that critical disability studies is a critical and reflexive project that invites us to pose further questions about the purpose and inclusivity of disability theory (Goodley et al., 2019). Our understandings of disability studies as theoretically and contextually-driven praxis challenges us to reflect on new forms of inquiry, inviting disability studies scholars and activists across the global North and South¹ to engage with disability studies as a decolonial praxis that is epistemically and socio-politically informed and transformed by specific contexts. Indeed, we call for the need to reflect on the historical emergence of (Western) disability studies as a field of inquiry that, unsurprisingly, has privileged Western disability theories and activist approaches, at one level, and the historical/contemporary social conditions in which we – disabled, racialized, and chronically ill activists scholars – have engaged, resisted, and spoken back to this Western hegemony through our collective work of writing, editing, publishing, on the other.

In fact, as the three of us unequivocally argued (Padilla et al., DDSC webinar, 2023), *the* socially constructed boundary between academia and activism set forth by Western

¹ The phrase ‘global South’ references distinct spaces outside Western European and North American contexts. The global South signifies systemic inequalities geopolitically constructed by the history of transnational colonialism and imperialism (Dados & Connell, 2012). We decided to use the capitalised ‘S’ for the South because we deploy the South as a political concept, not as a territorial determinant/compass direction. However, when we use ‘global’ with a lower ‘g’, we intend to “crip” the North American use of the “Global South” as merely a distinct geopolitical space that stands in binary relation to the “Global North” and instead, recognize complex relations of power within the South itself because of colonialism and coloniality that have taken place in the global context. This concept has enabled us to discuss disability experience and theory related to the precarity, vulnerabilities and instabilities signified by the political usage of the ‘South’ in different parts of the world under distinctive socio-economic and politico-cultural circumstances.

academic institutions is, in itself, a Western construct that tends to limit our relationship and capacity to think and act together. As global South disability scholars and activists, we take this themed issue as a decolonial praxis that, we hope, allows us to challenge the colonial/modernist imaginings of disability as a means to socio-economic development in a global neoliberal context where the colonialities of rules have been reinforced (Abay & Soldatic, 2024). By decoloniality, we mean to rethink, revisit, reclaim, and re-centre knowledges and praxis from historically marginalized spaces, and to create a more radical space for disrupting what may have been taken as truth about disability in the global South. We ask ourselves, then: How may we refuse to accept this normative boundary and re-build our relationships by thinking *from* and *with* the South as a form of epistemic disruption? How may we shift this conversation about disability in the global South in ways that create alternative venues and possibilities for re-imagining decolonial disability futures? To this end, we argue for a decolonial disability studies approach which centers debility processes, voices and relationalities of the most marginalized disabled people in the global South *within* and *across* distinctive geopolitical, socio-cultural and historical contexts. Through this editorial, then, we also want to reflect on and interdependently articulate the cross-coalitional power of our collective positionality as global South scholars and activists with extensive decolonial experiences in transnational contexts.

In thinking with disability in Southern spaces, we contend that while critical disability studies scholars have increasingly argued for disrupting the boundaries between academia and activism for decades, the conventional boundaries between global North/South in the politics of disability theorizing and activism have remained relatively unchanged, and, in fact,

untroubled. Following Helen Meekosha's provocative critique of disability studies as a "form of scholarly colonialism," Jasbir Puar (2023) cautions that "disability studies may unwittingly function as a handmaiden to US empire if we do not interrogate the genealogies of the field that exist not despite the occluding of race and empire, but because of such elisions" (p. 119). Furthermore, we are concerned that global North scholars and their Northern epistemologies have continued to hold powerful positions as knowledge producers, whereas global South activists, scholars, and practitioners have been positioned as applicants/passive consumers of such knowledge (See, Connell, 2007; Nguyen, 2018). This themed issue, thus, aims to tackle this epistemic injustice by re-positioning global South scholars and activists as knowledge producers, thinkers, and activists in their own contextual and epistemically relevant ways. We, therefore, ask: Who does the work of disability theorizing, and who is positioned as practitioner or applicant of this pre-given theory while also serving as empirical data for the theorizing to happen? It may be important, then, to recognize that, despite growing recognition of global South and disability in this ever-evolving field of disability studies, the "coloniality of knowledge" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 23) continues to instill and hegemonically governs the politics of disability theorizing today. How can we do disability studies differently, outside of this assumed binary? How might we be accountable, respectful, and fully open to global South knowledge contributions and reformulations?

Situating the Themed Issue

Current transnational struggles against settler colonialism in different parts of the globe, is reflected in students' protests and decolonial movements against Western colonial policies and practices, that include acts of genocide, land occupation, colonial dispossession,

and the killings and maiming of global South bodies across geopolitical borders such as Palestine, Haiti, Kashmir, South Sudan, Afghanistan or Indigenous peoples in Turtle Island. All these sustained struggles against the politics of Western colonialism and imperialism are witnessed in so-called post-colonial spaces today. Even as we write our editorial, we are shaken by the escalation of genocide as Israeli tanks have entered close to the border crossing of Rafah, intensifying military operation and mass destruction of the Indigenous land and bodies (AP News, 2024, May 7)². Ongoing socio-political, ideological, economic, and epistemic struggles against debility (Puar, 2017) and vulnerable people's exclusion across global Southern spaces necessitates that we think together about ways of researching disability that are true to these contexts of disablement. In the face of massive destructions caused by the colonial invasion, displacement, disablement, along with housing, climate, ecological, and social crises across the globe, we hope that this themed issue represents a constellation of "knowledges born out of struggles" (Santos, 2018), elevating spaces for decolonial conversations and reflecting on ways in which disability scholars, academics, and activists can collectively resist (neo)colonial, (neo)imperialist, transnational capitalist, and neoliberal ideologies and practices that produce disability and debilitation (Anand, 2022; Erevelles & Nguyen, 2016; Minich, 2014, 2023; Puar, 2017).

This themed issue is not the first one about the politics of the global South, disability, and decoloniality; the collective of work informed by disability studies scholars such as

² AP News (2024, May 7). Israel begins military operation in Rafah, hours after Hamas agrees to a cease-fire. Available at https://apnews.com/live/cease-fire-israel-hamas-updates?user_email=254a73e5e980fc09da3bda2e30ab7053005aff3e54fab1e710cd000ce9580802&utm_medium=AfternoonWire&utm_source=Sailthru-AP&utm_campaign=AfternoonWire_May6_2024&utm_term=Afternoon%20Wire

Karen Soldatic, Robel Afeworki Abay, Shaun Grech, Tsitsi Chataika, Helen Meekosha, and Sara María Acevedo, to name a few, has opened pathways for rethinking the Western and Eurocentric foundations of disability studies at the intersections with colonialism and coloniality (see, e.g., Abay & Soldatic, 2024; Grech, 2015). For example, in a special issue of *Disability and the Global South* in 2019 guest edited by Reed-Sandoval & Sirvent), the co-editors spelled out their aims to: (1) “demonstrate (particularly, but not exclusively, to decolonial theorists) ways in which decolonial theory may lend itself to the ... analysis of disability,” and (2) “provide an overview of some key themes of decolonial scholarship for disability studies scholars who may be unfamiliar with this literature” (p. 1554). In other words, Reed-Sandoval and Sirvent sought to bridge the two bodies of literature to find ways for both to inform each other reciprocally. Likewise, in the *Preface* to their recent handbook, Chataika & Goodley (2024) explicitly expressed a similar desire to bridge disability studies and post-colonial studies, while noting that “[b]ringing together two transformative arenas of knowledge production should not be confused with fusing or collapsing the two interdisciplinary fields together...” (p. xii). Alternatively, Puar (2023) argues that a radical orientation of global South’s politics of locations must not bracket the global South and Southern disability studies, but rather, “take seriously that no singular ‘disability analytic’ exists” (p. 120). By this, she points to the need to theorize the biopolitical project of disability and whiteness within the context of settler colonialism, arguing that it is impossible to disaggregate the epistemological project of disability outside of its colonial and imperialist contexts. We believe that this is a good illustration of trends in this rapidly growing body of post-colonial, decolonial, and anti-colonial disability studies. At the same time, what this new

themed issue does, we hope, is to situate our writings within historical and contemporary contexts in ways that inform our decolonial praxis. In this praxis of thinking and doing disability studies, we invite our contributors and potential readers to think with disability decolonially. Thinking with disability decolonially, we posit, means unsettling conventional forms of knowledge production on disability which operates as a form of coloniality, and to co-create and co-design more transgressive spaces and possibilities that enable scholars and activists to think and act with disability from a non-Western epistemic paradigm. This is the kind of place-based set of practices that Mignolo (2007) calls delinking, insofar as one moves intentionally away from the epistemological links of Eurocentrism that chain oppressed communities, disabled communities in global South contexts most pre-eminently, to alienating modes of knowledge which perpetuate their sense of powerlessness and passive acquiescence.

To do this work decolonially, we share the desire to bring tension into the transformative potential of these sub-fields. We are also convinced that it is time for decolonial theory to embrace disability as a core matrix of intersectionality with a rank similar as well as closely intertwined to the coloniality of power as it expresses and unfolds through race, gender, class, sexuality and caste extractive and marginalizing dynamics. Agreeing that conditions are finally maturing for the sub-field of decolonial disability studies to come of age, our aim with this special issue is closely aligned with Erevelles & Abay's (2024) call "to actively work towards disability futures... across borders ...beyond metaphor...beyond affect...beyond innocence and towards a transformative political economy of care." (p. 46)

Indeed, this themed issue is the fruit of our collective efforts to sustain and build relations among global South scholars and activists in the context of grief, unwellness, and vulnerability in ways that affect our crip bodies and minds in precarious social relations. We have learned to unlearn Western academic regimes of productivity and performativity by learning how to accommodate each other in a non-linear manner and by challenging ourselves to make space for one another. Working on this collection in a context of our precarity and unwellness in the face of the neoliberal push for “high impact” journal publications reflects our struggles to resist colonial/neo-liberal/neo-imperialist forms of academia across (colonial) universities in the global North and South. To quote once again Erevelles (2014): “disability studies epitomizes disruptive vulnerability that refuses to disappear.” (n.p.). This entails proactive disruptions of ableist academic norms by being mindful of crip time as much more than an accommodation, as a form of liberation (Samuels, 2017).

Engaging with this unique kind of “epistemic decolonization” (de Sousa Santos, 2018), we asked each contributor in our themed issue to state their positionality and understanding of the global South as a way of putting forth the South as a critical concept that goes beyond geographical locations and to critically engage with its geo-political, historical, and epistemic foundations. We recognise that as we, contributors and editors, proceeded to define our global South positionality, it was inevitable that we encountered many ways in which the colonial politics of knowledge production operates to undermine and discredit global South knowledges and practices as inferior and unworthy of academic recognition. We thus invite readers to pause and ponder critically about the content and form of academic

coloniality that are resisted through the open-access publication of this journal and this issue. Contributors to this issue engage deeply with these decolonial, discursive and material practices that seek to cultivate an innovative constellation of liberatory futurities radically grounded in our everyday situated knowledges, challenges, and spheres of opportunity. We invite readers to re-imagine the global South in line with a genuine sense of epistemic justice – re-positioning the global South knowledge production in an equal power relationship with that of the global North.

While critical disability studies has sought to challenge the fatalist linear nature of neoliberal futurity (Fritsch, 2016), a decolonial conversation would have to do harder work. It needs to be more transgressive by questioning the foundations and hidden (often overt) connotations of knowledge, epistemologies, and praxis that have been produced about and even against global South actors, or for the consumption of the global South from a global North perspective. Decolonial disability studies raises epistemic and political questions: what is the social location of knowledge? In what contexts have such knowledges been produced? What are specific geo-political conditions associated with the production of disability and the ableist epistemic spaces where these production dynamics rest? Furthermore, as apparent from the articles introduced below, this themed issue presents a wave of thinking about disability, coloniality, and decoloniality that create spaces for re-imagining decolonial, anti-colonial, and anti-ableist futures.

Introducing the articles

In what follows, we provide a snapshot of each of the articles in this collection. They have been selected to be published in this themed issue based on their engagement with

disability studies from a decolonial standpoint. The conversation between Laura Jaffee and Lara Sheehi in this themed issue, for example, demonstrates the transgressive implications of decolonial work, and sheds light on what we seek to develop in this issue by showcasing ways in which anti-ableist transgressiveness can be enacted and embodied. In particular, they approach decolonial disability work as the enactment of transformational dialogical and dialectical engagements with the politics of decolonial feminist praxis towards disrupting colonial and ableist ideologies. They openly critique our common tendency to fixate our knowledge on such issues as access and accessibility. The authors challenge ableism as a “logic of violence” that renders not only the individual body but also an entire nation disabled. Joining each other from a Palestinian student movement as a part of their everyday praxis, the authors call for a politics of solidarity that consciously tackles the tensions and struggles between disability and decolonial movements through their collective work for social justice and liberation.

From his positionality as blind/disabled scholar and activist, Alexis Padilla invites readers to ponder about the value of theorizing decolonial disability futurities. To this end, he draws on Glissant’s decolonial work. Padilla refers to relational ontologies as “understandings of being and becoming which, almost always situated in spatial politics, engender knowledges and diverse modes of truth-telling from “habits born of the imagination in place.” (p. 3). In other words, he elevates place-based dynamics, contextualizing disability futurities within the inter-imperialist spaces of transmodernities that constitute Black, disabled/Latinx and Caribbean identities as spaces for coalition building and transgressive possibilities. Furthermore, he argues that Glissant’s decolonial relation to the historicity of

place has a potential to elevate “sentipensante/ pluriversal politics,” which he conceptualizes as “modes of knowledge creation and distribution along with their imaginative value” (p. 3), thus opening the door to imagine disability otherwise within inter-imperial spaces of precarity and debility as those faced by disabled inhabitants of the Caribbean and beyond. In her article, Ai Binh Ho advances Southern disability studies through her provocative critique of “beautiful debilitation,” which she defines as “the visuality of war-produced debilitation” exemplified in the international relations between the United States and Vietnam. Her powerful critique begins with the medical journey and visual representations of Phan Thi Kim Phuc – the young girl exposed to severe burns by a napalm rain on her Trang Bang village 50 years ago, as captured in the “Terror of War” photograph taken by artist Nick Ut. She argues that “[t]he power of beautiful debilitation remains central to Vietnam and US political relations today, [...] as war injuries continue to act as a bridge between the former enemies within the context in which reparation and accountability remain out of reach.” At the same time, she does not shy away from critiquing the Vietnamese post-colonial nation in utilizing beautiful debilitation as a weaponizing approach in perpetuating violence. As she maintains, “[c]ritiquing the production of worldwide disability by the violence and wars provoked by the North cannot alone advance the lives of debilitated people in the South.”

Meanwhile, Shehreen Iqtadar and David Hernandez-Saca develop a different yet equally provocative dialogue between global South and decolonial disability theorizing. They invoke the legacy of DisCrit in intersectional educational spaces where racialized and ableist dynamics of oppression coexist. Their argument is crucial because it strives to elevate the concept of global South informed DisCrit. They enrich and transform an intersectional

framework which until now has primarily explored the interlocking matrices of oppression which rely on race and disability dynamics within global North educational contexts. By recognizing the transnational nature of teacher training within higher education institutions as well as the immense significance of migration dynamics of understandings of both ableism and racism, these authors open the door for revolutionizing how academic teacher education spaces in global North and global South alike can start sensitizing their epistemological assumptions regarding global South informed realities when it comes to propelling anti-ableist and antiracist inclusivity for both teacher educators and teacher candidates. In turn, they aim at impacting classroom level ecologies of micro-aggression, various modes of pathologizing disabled students of color, especially those of immigrant origin, and myriad forms of social exclusion (Annamma, 2018; Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Bell, 2006; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011).

Nguyen et al.'s paper on young disabled women's leadership initiatives gathers together a series of insights from youth organizations across the world from a transnational project that generated South-South knowledge exchange. The paper centres on the overlap between disability activism and disability studies scholarship as it contests dominant Eurocentric knowledge circulation through the work undertaken by young women's groups in organizing community research and outreach in three sites, Empangeni in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, the West Bengal region in India and A Luoi district in Vietnam. Emphasizing the significance of knowledge produced by young disabled women's participation in everyday matters of disability governance, the paper highlights the need to attend to specific contexts of the global South while developing social strategies of resilience

in the face of disablement caused by distinct circumstances of vulnerability. In addition, it shows how decolonizing methodologies become actionable by empowering these young women to own their disabled and local knowledges as epistemic dreams which allowed them to transcend everyday struggles and envision alternative futurities whose roadmap is intrinsically activist and participatory (see, e.g., Hale, 2006; Speed, 2006).

The article by Tirtha Pratim Deb and the co-authored work by Nandini Ghosh and Suchandra Bhaduri foreground disability conceptualisation in the Indian context by destabilizing historical assumptions and revisiting terminological standardizations, respectively. Deb studies the coloniality of oralism and how it operated in the nineteenth-century British-colonised Indian context while a range of hearing scholars and policymakers deliberated on the benefits of oralism. Deb's critical excavation of a Bengali book on deaf pedagogy in the early twentieth century contributes to existing scholarship on disability history of the Bengal region while consolidating interventions made by Indian professionals working under British rule. Continuing the theme of the Bengal region under British colonial rule, Ghosh and Bhaduri trace the politics of naming disability while considering that concepts pre-exist terms, as in the case of regional terms invented to mean disability. Additionally, their paper underscores the need to reflect on changes in disability naming in multilingual contexts, drawing attention to a significant feature of erstwhile colonies like India that are internally diverse in terms of linguistic orientation, social composition and religious orientation.

One of the most significant insights of the articles combined in this volume is their potential to resist the homogenizing of the global South and disablement profiles of the

regions that characterize global North scholarship on places of the global South. Drawing on a variety of qualitative research material and adopting methodological approaches that suit the sites under study, the articles foreground the limitations of global North disability studies ideology and methodology. The articles in this collection offer a direct response to many disabling consequences resulting from genocide, mass displacement, transnational humanitarian crises, and historical modes of subjugation. This special themed issue hopes to make a timely intervention into understanding and counteracting the disabling consequences of geo-political conflicts and violence taking place in many transnational contexts, particularly in the global South. As a constellation of decolonial works, they not only urge readers to re-imagine decolonial and anti-ableist futures; they articulate actionable ways to start moving in those directions. Therefore, through the articles in this issue, we encouraged readers to engage with contributors to connect theory and praxis in ways that set the stage for decolonial enactments of delinking (Mignolo, 2007, 2021) from hegemonic modes of disablement within coloniality, forging a radical politics of writing, theorizing, conceptualizing, organizing, performing, and teaching which model the alternative knowledges and futures born from the heart of our collective struggles (de Sousa Santos, 2018).

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