

**“I’ll Pick You Up By Your Back Brace and Throw You Like a Suitcase”:
On Naming Discrimination Against Disability**

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Abstract: What word is there for discrimination practiced against disability? In the following essay, I will explore—through personal narrative—incidents of discrimination in the academic, non-academic, and reader-text environments. Then I will discuss the various meanings of the word *ableist* and the importance of placing a name for discrimination against disability in the public domain.

Key Words: Disability, Discrimination, Ableist/Ableism

“What is politically correct these days?” a visiting poet said during a workshop class at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. We were discussing a poem in which a deaf and physically challenged boy enlightens the speaker during church. “Is it disabled? Malformed?” he asked the class.

No one answered.

I bent my head down and pretended to focus on the language of the poem. I bent my head down because I have bangs for hiding my eyes. I wanted the bangs to hide my eyes because his words named me—the disabled, the malformed. Me, with prosthetic leg and metal rods along my spine. Had he not read my own poem included in the workshop packet? Had he not even read the title, “Crip Language”? The title alone should have informed him of his audience. Did he not notice that I carried a blue and pink plastic seat into class? Did he not notice that I used this child’s device to sit on so I would be tall enough to see over the table? And even if he didn’t read or notice any of these things, was he really going to critique the poem using discriminatory, offensive language?

“Is it deficient? Incapacitated?” he said.

“I think the boy’s deficiency...” another student adopted his language to continue discussing the poem.

“There’s a Professor at Princeton University, many people think this is very controversial, even fascist,” he said. “Professor Singer says that if we kill defective animals, why don’t we kill defective babies?”

I did not cry. I did not cry. A list of options ran through my head. I could stand up and walk out. But if I walked out, how would I explain myself? What word could I use to describe the visiting Professor’s choices during class? Was there a word for discrimination against disability? What was the word? I could raise my hand and ask him to refrain from making discriminatory remarks. But he was the visiting poet. What did I know? I couldn’t even find the word to describe his language. I felt voiceless and trapped.

When it was time to discuss my poem, I said, “I’d rather not.”

“But I didn’t have a chance to write much on your poem, so I’d really like to talk about it,” he said.

“No thanks,” I said.

His comments continued to reverberate in my head as class ended, as I drove home, as I type this sentence. If his comments had been aimed at African Americans, and if I were a member of that minority group, then I would have redress through the NAACP. For the sake of

conjecture and analogy, let us consider the same conversation using racist language. The only word I will change in this analogy is the second use of “defective.” What if the visiting Professor had said, “If we kill defective animals, why don’t we kill black babies?” Or what if he had said, “If we kill defective animals, why don’t we kill female babies?” If he had made either of these remarks without placing Professor Singer’s comment in context, we would label him as racist or sexist.

Let us also consider his question of “What is politically correct these days?” If he had been discussing the politically correct word for African Americans, he may have said, “Is it African Americans? Blacks? Niggers?” We would call him racist. We may even write the NAACP and ask for a public apology, a withdrawal of his tenure. After all, we do not want racism infiltrating the minds of our youth through a reputable Professor, do we? However, if the Professor is discriminating against disability, then his comments are validated because none of us can name what offense, if any, he has committed. If he had made offensive comments toward African Americans or women, then at least a word exists for describing his language and therefore, his offense. We would at least have the power of words like *racist*, *sexist*. Without a word for discrimination against disability, we are powerless.

Here is another incident that illustrates how discrimination against disability occurs outside the academic setting and how this discrimination receives the support of the public.

The public, in this case, was an audience of approximately one hundred people attending a singer-songwriter event at Ace’s Basement in Greensboro, North Carolina. The audience consisted of teenagers, college students, and a few business professionals. The venue smelled of cigarette smoke and cheap beer. The main act began setting up their equipment. During sound check, the guitarist spoke into a microphone, yelling this remark to someone in the audience.

“I will pick you up by your back brace and throw you like a suitcase. I’m going to do you like Christopher Reeves [sic], take that straw and blow you on out of here...” he said.

The audience cheered and clapped.

Once again, I felt suffocated by the public approval given to discriminatory declarations. The guitarist’s evocative threat, “throw you like a suitcase,” reminded me of how other minorities have been treated when sharing space with the public. I thought of segregation. Surely today, we would not overhear a white person say to a black person, “I will throw you out of here like a suitcase.” But, in the unfortunate situation where we would overhear this, we have in our consciousness a word: racism. We have a tool for defining and defending: language.

Even though the incident occurred in a less reputable setting, in a bar, at a concert—what does the guitarist’s comment and the audience’s response say about the state of discriminating against disability in today’s society? I argue that the incident described says, “Vocalized prejudice against disability is okay.”

So far, the incidents I address have occurred in an academic setting and in a non-academic setting. But we do not have to travel to an event to see discriminatory language in action. If we are to evaluate discrimination against disability, perhaps we should begin with the Bible’s punishment of lepers or Shakespeare’s treatment of *Caliban*. However, we do not need to search older texts for this treatment of disability. It is pervasive in contemporary literature. The third incident I will describe occurs between reader and text.

There are multiple challenges to taking these excerpts and showing them as examples of discrimination. The excerpts will be out of context. I will commit the same act as the visiting poet who placed Professor Singer’s philosophy out of context. Since I am only offended by sentences that use discriminatory language, I will illustrate those sentences. But in doing this, I

will neglect to assess the work as a whole. Also, what would happen if there were guidelines to what a person could and couldn't write? I am not advising that these words should not have been written. I am not arguing for boundaries on what a person writes. I am asking for a language, for words, to describe the characters' views in these texts, the guitarist's comments to the audience, and the professor's discussion of a poem.

While reading *Open City*, a journal of literature and art funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), I encountered the following passage in Saïd Sayrafiezadeh's short story, "My Mother and the Stranger." The main character in Sayrafiezadeh's story discusses their "own anti-Semitic associations" which they admit they are in "great possession of."ⁱ

"I have always asserted that my mother's Jewishness is why I have found her so ugly my entire life, and why as her offspring I have often found myself to be so ugly. It is certainly helped by the fact that my mother does not have her hair done... does not date men ever, does not have sex with men ever, does not exhibit any sexuality... And the one time she wore a skirt I was confused and made vaguely uncomfortable by the sight of her calves and thighs in stockings, uncomfortable in the way one is when one watches a handicapped person attempting to dance, for instance. It is a painful attempt."ⁱⁱ

I found it difficult to continue reading the short story. I flinched. I put the text down. The author writes about a character's awareness of anti-Semitic views. However, Sayrafiezadeh does not write about the character's awareness of their discrimination against disability. Yet clearly, a character who thinks "it is a painful attempt" to watch a "handicapped person" dance is discriminating.

Since I could not initially continue reading the text, I called a Jewish colleague to discover her reaction to the text. She was not offended.

"Why is it that you are more offended by disability than I am about the anti-Semitic comment?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. I knew that the text had proven unreadable for me. I knew that if the short story had come from the literary canon, it would have been easier to think of the character's views as arcane and no longer acceptable. But since the story was contemporary, and since it so blatantly ostracized the "handicapped" from the nondisabled, I was offended.

"I think it's because I've been brought up studying and talking about Judaism and anti-Semitism. But for you, it's not something that's been talked about. It's not something that people discuss."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I can place what you read over there. I can think, 'Okay, this person is this type of person who thinks these things.' I can be more objective about it. I don't like it but it doesn't upset me to my core," she said.

After speaking with her, I returned to reading *Open City*. My experience as a reader was about to get worse.

Mark Jude Poirier's short story, "Happy Pills," is written in second person which makes the following sentences even more disturbing to read.

"You have every reason to be afraid of Thelma. She is retarded and smells like your grandmother, like cigarette smoke and cleaning fluid. Her eyes are crazy; there is nothing behind them."ⁱⁱⁱ

Since the reader does not have the mask of a character, the reader must adopt the views of the second person, or at least enter the contract of believing for as many pages as the story continues. Therefore, “you” discriminate against mental impediment. “You” reduce the “retarded” girl to a corpse: “There is nothing behind them [her eyes].”

Poirier’s second person further exploits disability by describing a rumored rape scene involving Thelma in which older boys “poked her pussy with a stick.”^{iv} At this point, I am numb. I continue reading to find out how much more offensive it can possibly be.

“You walk into Sam Goody Music and you’re greeted by a robotic voice: *Welcome to Sam Goody*. The source of the welcome is a deformed woman awkwardly perched in a wheelchair... You don’t look closely at her. You can’t... People will assume that Sam Goody is a charitable company for employing the handicapped.”^v

The name of the music store places the anecdote in a realistic setting. We recognize Sam Goody and since we are directly addressed—we are the “you,” we are the main character—the views expressed in “Happy Pills” are projected as our views. When Poirier writes, “You don’t look closely at her. You can’t,” it is the reader directly who observes this need to look away from disability. Also, the reader views Sam Goody as a “charitable company.” This implies that employing the disabled is an act of charity rather than a person working a job like anyone else.

“In a cab ride, ‘you’ think of what to say to the driver.

“Tell him about the long-haired kid outside a T station in Boston, blasting White Snake on a boom box, playing air-guitar with a fucked-up arm. And speaking of fucked up arms: that beggar kid in the bus station in Quito.”^{vi}

The excerpts from these short stories are from nondisabled perspectives. Lennard J. Davis describes the conflict that arises when a character in a work of literature is disabled. He writes, “The disabled character is never of importance to himself or herself. Rather, the character is placed in the narrative ‘for’ the nondisabled characters—to help them develop sympathy, empathy, or as a counterbalance to some issue in the life of the ‘normal’ character.”^{vii} In “Happy Pills,” the disabled characters “counterbalance” the narrator’s tension with his wife who has chosen to abort a deformed fetus.

Regardless of the ‘normal’ narrator’s life issues, the words “fucked up arms” are offensive for a disabled reader. For an amputee, these words pierce. It would not be as offensive if I had a language with which to describe this text. If I could name, discuss, and talk about the text, using words to address the discrimination, then I may even appreciate it. “The notion of giving something a name is the vastest generative idea that ever was conceived,” writes Susanne K. Langer.^{viii} By naming, we mentally classify and sort or, as my Jewish colleague says, we can begin to think, “This person is this type of person who thinks these things.” Whether the thoughts are racist, sexist, or discrimination against disability, by naming those thoughts we generate an idea of the person or text. Ann Berthoff describes the process of naming when she writes, “our instruments are the names by which we differentiate; with those differentiations, those sortings, we weave the fabric of discourse.”^{ix} Without coming to a consensus that extends beyond the arena of disabled individuals and disability studies scholars, we allow for a void in public discourse of disability.

When researching the word for discrimination against disability, a colleague told me the word already exists. How did she know the word? One of her friends, a disabled female, used ableist to refer to a person who privileged the able-body over the disabled body. Paul K. Longmore uses this word and has given the acronym U.S.A. an alternative meaning—the United States of Ableists. Disability studies texts use the word ableist to mean a variety of different

things from society's negative views about disability to discrimination against the disabled. Davis likens ableism to "better known terms like *racism* or *sexism*."^x The word ableist has a substantial history in disability studies. However, one quick search via the online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary turns up zero entries for ableist. The word is not in Merriam-Webster or Cambridge's dictionary. If ableist has been adopted by the disabled, and scholars in the field of disability studies, but it has not been adopted by dictionaries, what does this say about the public consciousness of the word ableist? How are we to become empowered by a word that has no public awareness?

As cited, the word ableist is used by people encountering its implications or by people in its field of study. If ableist is not recognized by the general public, what does that say about our awareness of discrimination against disability? When I surveyed my non-disabled colleagues and friends, not only did they not know the word ableist, but when I said the word aloud, they could not infer its meaning. What is ableist? Would it not make sense to be an ableist if the word means a person who prefers able-bodiedness over disability? No one wants to be disabled. Perhaps this is why non-disabled people become uncomfortable discussing disability. Rosemary Garland Thomson discusses how we are both "obsessed with and intensely conflicted about the disabled body. We fear, deify, disavow, avoid, abstract, revere, conceal, and reconstruct disability..."^{xi} There is an eerie feeling of It-Could-Happen-To-You that foreshadows a conversation on disability between an able-bodied person and a disabled person. It is easy enough for an able-bodied person to dismiss concerns about addressing the lack of language in disability discourse. Their dismissal may reflect an underlying fear of one-day joining America's largest minority.

Now is the time to look beyond our fears and embrace a discourse long overlooked. We need words for discrimination against disability. We need them yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Without a publicly acknowledged word for discrimination against disability, people will continue practicing this prejudice without being named, without consequence. The visiting professor will continue to use words such as "malformed," "deficient," and "incapacitated." The guitarist will continue to discriminate and receive public approval rather than disapproval. Characters in contemporary literature will slander disabled characters. Perhaps these incidents will continue regardless of whether or not a name for discrimination exists. At the very least, naming discrimination against the disabled and placing that name in the public consciousness will begin to hold individuals accountable for prejudiced beliefs while giving a voice to those who endure the consequence of that prejudice.

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Endnotes

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ⁱⁱ Sayrafiezadeh, Saïd. "My Mother and the Stranger," *Open City*. Number Seventeen (Summer 2003), 61.

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- ^{viii} qtd. in Ann Berthoff's *The Making of Meaning*. (Upper Montclair: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1981), 110.
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- ^x Berthoff, Ann. *The Making of Meaning*, 35.
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