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## Gender, Disability and the Postcolonial Nexus

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## Wagadu Summer 2007

### Editorial:

#### Pushpa Naidu Parekh

The special issue, titled “Intersecting Gender and Disability Perspectives in Rethinking Postcolonial Identities,” of *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies*, investigates the intersecting perspectives, grounded in or emanating from theoretical, discursive as well as experiential frameworks and positions specific to gender, disability and postcoloniality. Inclusive of identity formations as well as deformations at various nodes of postcolonial histories, within and across social, cultural, economic and political contexts and contingencies, the study focuses on the gender and disability inscriptions of postcolonial subjects as agents and intransigents. Postcolonial Studies have focused on the migrations and translocations, as well as displacements and emplacements of post-independent subjects of former colonies in the context of globalization and neo-imperialism. An important and embattled area of postcolonial theory and analysis is identity. Advocates of identitarian politics emphasize subject positions vis à vis race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, sexuality, disability. On the other hand, disclaimers to specific identity categories highlight intersecting positions. To consider disability in this nexus is not simply an “adding on” of another marginalized category but to unravel the complex of identity itself. As Judith Butler (1991) points out “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes” (p.13). While medical and legal discourses of disability pervade in regions of the South, relatively few studies have explored their significance in analyses of colonial/postcolonial institutions and hierarchies of power structures. Moreover, re-evaluation of humanities and humanistic perspectives and dimensions of disability challenges to social construction, rehabilitative or social service models, and implications of legal mandates versus lived experiences are on-going and heatedly debated issues within disability communities and scholarship. Constituting, reassembling or deploying an intersectional framework of postcolonial identities from various standpoints of disability constituencies are yet to be fully explored. The special issue will undertake the challenge to fill this gap as well as map new directions in interdisciplinary theorizing and analyzing by focusing on intersections of gender, disability, and postcoloniality.

The articles collected in this issue of *Wagadu* focus on the intersections of gender and disability centered discourses, experiences, representations and theories. In the process, they question, affirm, re-imagine as well as critique the narratives and scholarship on postcolonial identities, and move us to shift existing frameworks as well as theoretical lenses. The articles included are informed by disability-and-gendered analysis of identities forged at the various historical stages as well as political, ideological and psychic phases of postcolonial subject constitution. The methodological approaches are inter, cross as well as pan disciplinary, collaborating with a network of fields emerging from Culture Studies, such as critical race theory, transnational /transregional feminism, visual and performative media, cyberculture, queer/transgender analysis, as well as film, environmental and global studies. In addition, this issue features articles exploring

disability as a cultural construct, human rights discourse, as well as a “development” agenda, in relation to postcolonial contexts, issues and theories.

An in-depth and focused study of the triangulation of gender, disability and postcoloniality has not been previously undertaken, although works that analyze gender, disability and race in the context of the global North with some discussion of the global South are to be noted, such as Saxton and Howe’s *With Wings: An Anthology of Literature By and About Women With Disabilities* (1987), Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), Snyder, Brueggemann and Thomson’s *Disability Studies: Enabling Humanities* (2002), as well as Smith and Hutchinson’s *Gendering Disability* (2004). Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* stands out as an incisive and inclusive analysis of disability/gender/race/ethnicity/class subject constitutions at historical junctures of European colonialism and American imperialism. Thomson’s most significant contribution, for the purposes of this issue, is her intersectional analysis of the American and European freak shows that “framed and choreographed bodily differences that we now call ‘race,’ ‘ethnicity,’ and ‘disability’ in a ritual that enacted the social process of making cultural otherness from the raw materials of human physical variation” (p. 60). Through visual representations of exhibited photographs, billboards and advertisements, Thomson demonstrates the racist/abelist/sexist processes that made spectacles of a variety of ‘othered’ people. Among the spectacle of differently embodied were displayed the colonized male and female bodies from Mexico, Brazil, Africa, and black America. These figures included Julia Pastrana, a Mexican-Indian woman, the embalmed corpse of whose hirsute body was exhibited in freak shows and circuses; the Ubangi woman with lip discs; a microcephalic black male in P. T. Barnum’s “What Is It?” museum exhibit; and Saartje Baartmann as “the Hottentot Venus” flanked by an albino woman and a dwarf.

In response to “the theoretical orthodoxy” regarding Baartmann, following Sander Gilman’s “Black Bodies, White Bodies,” Zine Magubane (2001) challenges the poststructuralist analysis that imputes sexual and racial differences to psychological determinism and ahistorical assumptions of race and blackness among nineteenth century Europeans. In “Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the ‘Hottentot Venus’” (2001), Magubane argues for a historical scrutiny of social relations and ideologies concerning racial differences, by asking “what social relations determined which people counted as Black, and for which people did Blacks become icons of sexual difference and why?” (p. 817). Moreover, she challenges the ahistorical assumptions in Gilman’s theories regarding Baartman: “The first assumption is that Baartmann’s color and sexual difference not only marked her as different but also rendered her fundamentally the same as all other Black people. The second assumption is that ideas about what constitutes Africanity and Blackness have remained relatively unchanged over time” (p. 822).

These assumptions need to be carefully examined for gender and disability constructions and for ways in which their intersections have defined certain nineteenth century American and European ideologies of femininity, cult of invalidism, class differentiation,

racism and paranoia against immigrants. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English (1973) document in their pamphlet, *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness*, these class distinctions frame the discourse of illnesses in women paradoxically, as female frailty in the wealthy white, “the ‘sick’ women of upper classes” (p.15) and as contagion and sexual licentiousness in the poor and immigrants, the “disease carriers and breeders”, “the ‘sickening’ women of the working class” (p. 45). Further studies in postcolonial theorizing need to make the connections among these shifting frameworks and their reflections or departures in colonial/postcolonial historical contexts. How did social relations shaped by historical factors construct ideologies of gender and disability? In what ways did these ideologies shift within the context of colonial contacts, conflicts and collusions? How did the various sources of authority, from scriptural to institutional, differ in the assignments of meanings to bodies, both colonizing and colonized?

In this issue, the authors explore the complex interplay of gender and disability in the lives of people and cultures in the contexts of defining and challenging postcolonial nationhood, citizenship, transnationality, and cosmopolitanism, as well as shaping the contours of futuristic and posthuman imaginaries. They analyze the diverse material and political circumstances of postcolonials in specific geographic and socio-economic locations as simultaneously gendered and disabled. In bringing together the threads of gender, disability and postcoloniality as identity categories, experiences, rights issues, discourses, theories and movements that work in tandem and through networks, the scholars in this special issue of *Wagadu* undertake multiple challenges. They address the limitations of current postcolonial theorizing for critical understanding and analysis of the co-existences, conflicts and negotiations that shape the expression, reformulation and representation of such multiple identities and experiences, especially figured as historically contextualized and geo-politically positioned for new formations of the postcolonial. They inaugurate new lenses and frameworks, and re-examine the ideologies of decolonization within the context of global flows and movements as well as reification of border hostilities and racial profiles, increasing wars and conflicts. Finally, they provide the critical tools and ideological shifts that revitalize the reading of bodies and texts of postcoloniality, and the cultural terrains that are formed at the chiasmus of experiential selves, social formations and disciplinary discourses.

Some of the topics in this issue challenge the limitations within current forms of postcolonial theorizing as well as Disability Studies. Others apply and evaluate the impact of postcolonial theories on analysis and representations of disability/gender issues, subjects, experiences and rights and of disability/gender theories and interventions in Postcolonial Studies. Analysis of specific disability movements within phases of colonial and independence struggles as well as in post-independent phases focus on intersecting struggles for gender and disability rights in specific geo-political and social contexts.

"(Post)colonising Disability" by Mark Sherry provides an important preliminary background as well as the critical lens by which to approach the intersections among disability/gender/(post)colonialism. His article delves into the problematics of metaphoric

and discursive uses of postcolonialism and disability that conflate distinct social experiences and issues critical to understanding the historical and cultural grounding of identity categories. At the same time, Sherry illustrates the intersections among gender/disability/postcolonialism that need more nuanced analysis and study. Sherry himself undertakes this challenge in his study, when he, for example, contrasts Fanon's masculinist approach to colonialism to Aretxaga's gendered account of the "dirty protest" by the Irish Republican Army and the Irish National Liberation Army male and female members in Northern Ireland between 1978 and 1981. At the same time, he points out Aretxaga's failure to make connections among "bodily pain, embodied protest and disability within this context."

James Overboe in "Vitalism: Subjectivity Exceeding Racism, Sexism and (Psychiatric) Ableism" draws on the works of Agamben (1998) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1994) to argue for a new subjectivity of "lived experience of disability," and to encounter the pathologizing models that reduce "vitalism" of lived experience to "psychiatric episodes." Invoking the notion of "normative shadows," Overboe's analysis exposes the "institutional grids" framework and the restrictive humanism of enlightenment that inform concepts of citizenship and normality. Through the narrative of his own experience as a social worker with the client "Donna" (pseudonym), Overboe's article illuminates the institutional domestication of Donna's "madness," "aboriginal-ness" and "woman-ness," with a rare insight into the transgressive paradigms of silence, the subversive glance and exposure.

Exploring norms of sexuality, physical appearance, mental ability and social conformity and their implications for subjects of disability, scholars examine changing cultural landscapes and competing cultural influences. They study representations of disability and bodies of difference in cultural productions. Reflections on body and transbody phenomena and experiences, and representations of cyborgs, monsters and posthumans in futuristic literature and film assess the new cultural imaginaries in revising and/or reifying the old identity norms. With regard to the needed work in revamping postcolonial film representations of disability, one of the contributors, Katie Ellis, concludes: "In relation to disability film studies under a postcolonial framework *The Well* and *The Piano* demonstrate the iconographic use of disability as a visual shorthand that relies on ableist ideologies. Disability as a postcolonial tool/ identity carries with it many possibilities for critique, yet currently its political power is diminished by the tendency to adopt an individualistic mode, both in terms of representation and academic debate. While critiquing patriarchal power relations under a postcolonial framework, a critique of disability as disempowered by the same power structures is unexplored and marginally implicit at best."

Julie Nack Ngué's article, "Colonial Discourses of Disability and Normalization in Contemporary Francophone Immigrant Narratives: Bessora's *53 cm* and Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*" provides insight into the colonial discourses of illness and disability as they "inhabit the protagonists and their creators," specifically in two novels by female immigrant novelists living in France. In *53 cm* (1999) by Swiss-Gabonese writer Bessora and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003) by Senegalese Fatou Diome, the

protagonists experience the colonial cultural standards of race, gender and “normalcy” and “contend with colonial and contemporary assignations of bodily abnormality, excess, and deficiency.” Ngue’s literary analysis unravels how French discursive, socio-political, cultural and institutional policies of normalization, citizenship and alien or “foreign contamination” implicate Francophone female immigrant subjects through colonial discourses and practices of racism, sexism, nationalism and ableism. In addition, the author claims that “the material effects of colonial rule contributed to a number of *real* somatic and psychological crises.”

Nadia Guidotto’s “Monsters in the Closet: Biopolitics and Intersexuality” examines the monster figure as the “boundary marker of society.” As an “exception” (Agamben, 1998) and “abject body” (Kristeva, 1982), subjected by biopolitical strategies of regulation and management in order to maintain the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990) as the particular structure in society, the intersexed and hermaphrodite bodies are othered by techniques of normalization. Guidotto extends the analysis to include a discussion of racial and liberal elements in this normalizing politics. The article examines the intersection of racial and sexual politics in power mechanisms of the state and the collusions of medical and scientific institutions. The connections among colonial and imperial eugenic programs, modern so called “liberal” technological corrective procedures, as well as totalitarian edicts for elimination of intersexed bodies as well as racialized others are valuable contributions of the article. Moreover, as the author notes, “To complicate this analysis, I will also consider scholarly work on Indian *hijras* (Bakshi, 2004; Patel, 1997), not in analogous terms, but as a way to put pressure on Western treatments of intersexuality.”

Richard A. Jones’ article, “The Technology of Immortality, the Soul, and Human Identity” undertakes a philosophical inquiry into questions of im/mortality, posthumans, life and death, through an analysis of their evolutions in the intersecting fields of sciences and new technologies, game theory, and science fiction. The overarching premise, “death as the ultimate disability” underlies the analysis.

Impact of global phenomena such as war, environmental trauma, poverty and terrorism feature as impending contexts for rethinking ability/disability categories as well as discourses of development. In “Disability as Embodied Memory? A Question of Identity for the Amputees of Sierra Leone,” Maria Berghs examines the Sierra Leone post civil war discourses and imagery of amputees in the media. Against the constructed amputee identity in Sierra Leone society, the amputee narratives tell their own stories. Through the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (T.R.C.) in Sierra Leone, and the support of NGO’s, the amputees question their victim status and reaffirm an identity in which “notions of class and ethnicity may not play a big role, but masculinity certainly remains a relevant cultural marker in terms of identity.” Berghs notes, the amputee, used as a “genderless visual metaphor for the trauma and threat of war, to gain aid from foreign donors began telling her/his own stories in their cultural terms and questioned their victim status.”

Rebecca Dingo's study focuses on the rhetoric of "unfit, fit" in the development discourse of mainstreaming, in particular World Bank's contradictory arguments in gender, disability and development programs. Dingo's research intersects feminist rhetorical theory with transnational, public policy, disability, and visual culture studies. She is interested in how public policy-making at the local, national, and global levels are created not only to persuade policy-makers but also every day citizens. In her scholarship Dingo demonstrates how the rhetorical dynamics of the policy-making process, through public, legal, political, and administrative institutions, structure audiences' collective and individual identities, cultural memories, value systems, senses of place, and material circumstances.

In the process of reframing disability, race, and gender, a number of authors in this issue evaluate medical, social and humanistic discourses of diseases (HIV-AIDS, Hansen's, mental or psychological). Eunjung Kim examines the transformative directions in Korean *Hansenin* rights movements and their specific links to both Japanese colonial practices of isolation and incarceration of the subjects of Hansen's disease, stigmatized as "leprosy," and the emergence of postcolonial citizenship and nationhood based on institutionalized system of public health. The author explores the historical contingencies of the labeling and classification of diseases, more or less stigmatized based on its status as contagious or not, as well as its gendered location. The family, the nation and the colonial institutions collaborate in the socio-political, legal and biomedical mapping of diseased bodies; it is against this complex apparatus that the recent Korean human rights movement of the *Hansenin* is located.

Bruce Wade in "The Disabling Nature of the HIV / AIDS Discourse Among HBCU Students" makes connections among postcolonial racial identities and gender expectations as influential factors in HIV prevention attitudes and sexual risk-taking. His analysis of the "attitudes, gender role expectations, sexual scripts and risk-taking behaviors of contemporary college students" is informed by Erving Goffman's concept of social stigma, contemporary Critical Race Theory and Patricia Hill Collins' concepts of interlocking systems of oppression and Black sexual politics (2000, 2004). Through "focus groups, interviews and surveys with more than 250 students within the Atlanta University Center over the last two years," Bruce Wade examines how African American students attending HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) react to the threats of HIV and AIDS.

Feminist disability centered reconsiderations emphasize values of independence and self-reliance but also concepts of interdependence and intersubjectivity. Barbara Hoffman reviews *Kounandi* (2004), a film from Burkina Faso, in Jula language with English subtitles. She evaluates the representation of Kounandi, a little person, as a challenge to certain gender/disability norms within the context of male violence and disability stigma. However, Kounandi's mother, Miriam's childless state, interpreted by local villagers as a possible sign of female adultery, is solved by the miraculous delivery of an orphan child, Kounandi. These problematic issues, according to Hoffman, are presented not simply as social reality; they are complicated by the shift from realistic details to one of

“dreamscape, where time is collapsed, characters are iconic, and gender relations are caricatured.”

Pushpa Parekh in “Gender, Disability and the Postcolonial Nexus” examines literary and cultural reflections of the processes that shape the ideologies of gender and disability in colonial and postcolonial India as well as the Indian diaspora. The analysis is framed by postcolonial feminist disability theory and praxis that includes an examination of lived experiences; collective knowledge; political engagement; and ethics of responsibility. She addresses specific historical contexts of the (neo)colonialist and imperialist systems and operations of power at the intersection of gender and disability, and negotiations across the spaces and dynamics of power relations.

Aline Gubrium, drawing on black feminism, looks at “the socially constructed meanings of disability for seven southern, rural African-American women.” She focuses on “both the social location of the individual participants providing their narratives, as well as the discursive context in which their disabilities are constituted. Stories related to social location focus on poverty, race, and gender as intersecting sites for constructing identities related to disability.” She argues that postcolonial studies have “centered on race and gender oppression in the capitalist world system,” but have failed “to engage an analysis of disability and the ways that disability...is used to control individuals and groups.” Aline Gubrium shifts the analysis from theoretical models to participant narratives in the context of “low-wage work, poverty, gendered expectations, and racism.” She addresses simultaneously metaphoric and socially constructed forms of disability grounded in race-class-gender oppression matrix and their relationship to impairments. The implications of Gubrium’s analysis for disability inclusive frameworks in understanding local and global capitalism are worth pursuing.

The specific goals in this issue are to understand the distinct ramifications and histories of diverse disability cultures, to explore the postcolonial cultural contexts within which disability is assigned a particular “interpretive schema,” and to re-evaluate the “cultural inventory, including shared fictions” in the making of disability (Malmsheimer, 1986, p. 36). Since disciplinary fields and cultural politics are imbricated in the production of knowledge and the array of outlets for dissemination of forms of knowledge, it is important to consider how the knowledge of disability is produced, distributed and managed. Within humanistic disciplines, especially literature, figurative usage of disability has played a significant role in inscribing certain interpretive schema within which disability has been aligned with suffering, malevolence, moral flaw, and malady, physical weakness as well as spiritual lack. In order to question the cultural knowledge produced by these portrayals and narratives, it would be useful to examine the genealogy of tropes such as “wounds,” “afflictions,” “illness” that have impacted, overtly and covertly, a certain kind of disability knowledge. Within postcolonial discourses, disability has figured as an allegory of the postcolonial condition. Jahan Ramazani’s “The Wound of History: Walcott’s *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction” (1997) refers to “the pervasiveness of the trope of the wounded black body in negritude poetry—as in Césaire, Jacques Roumain, Jean-François Brierre, Léon Damas, and even Brathwaite” (p. 410). Ramazani analyzes the affliction/cure tropes and discourses in Walcott’s *Omeros*



that reify the characterization of colonial subjects as wounded, such as Caliban and Philoctete. Ramazani also comments on Walcott's refreshing twist by evoking the "inter-cultural inheritance" (p. 409), and the "polyrhythmic dance" of the "culturally alien and the native, the outside and the inside (410). The motif of "anticolonial defiance" as a kind of cure narrative accomplished through the "healing powers" of the *obeah* figure invites a reversal of colonial paradigms of agency, yet simultaneously reinscribes the disabled/diseased/wounded body as a state of loss, incompleteness, and a site of "colonial injury" awaiting cure (p. 415). Decolonization, imagined as curing and healing, has a disturbing relationship with colonization in setting up an oppositional model, which ultimately imagines the progressive eradication of bodies that are marked by disability.

### Closing Thoughts

This Journal issue aims to stimulate further research in the area. Some of the following queries highlight lacunae in current scholarship and identify areas to be further explored and studied. How did the colonized native body become the site of anarchy and in what ways did gendering/disabling/colonizing processes differ in settler versus exploitative colonies? What connections can be made between the disciplining, categorizing and managing of colonized bodies in the colonies and the colonizer's home grown practices of classism, ableism, racism and sexism in the exclusion and dehumanization of the poor, women and disabled and immigrants in the metropolis? In what ways do interdisciplinary investigations and collaborations inclusive of intersectional analysis of identity categories complicate the construction of postcolonial identities as another version of the colonial centered in the metropolis of global circuits? Further work also needs to be done in making south-south connections, with regard to study of intersecting identities. How do organizations such as South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) relate to South African Federation of the Disabled (SAFOD), or to the National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA), the national organization representing the rights and interests of people from non-English speaking background (NESB) with disability, their families and care takers throughout Australia? How do these organizations contend with ideas of "progress" and "globalization" to redefine approaches and movements that do not simply compartmentalize abilities/disabilities and gender categories.

The impact of increasing conflict and violence in national and international arenas must be evaluated in terms of state and international politics and the continuing practices of "disabling" masses in the name of war, ethnic cleansing, terrorism and other emergent forms of local and global genocides. In what ways can we articulate the social, psychological, economic, humanistic, rehabilitative, environmental and medical discourses in relationship to individual's plural sense of self? How do varying sensibilities of wholeness, pride, pain, fragmentation, freedom, frustration and dependency define the realities and experiences of subjects across a range of disabilities? How do factors such as man-made war and trauma, congenital or acquired disabilities through illnesses or environmental degradation, chronic conditions, "invisible," learning or developmental as well as age-related disabilities impact the specific ways in which postcolonial subject formations are constantly being contested?

Further, postcolonial theorizing of colonizer and colonized relationships need to include a more nuanced analysis of the economies of (dis)ability in different phases of capitalism in legitimating not only gender and race hierarchies but also ableist structures. What were the particular forms of inclusion and exclusion with regards to subjects of disability in these phases of capitalism as they impacted colonized societies? How were hierarchies of abilities created at historical junctures in the modes of production of specific regions impacted by colonialism? How do models of development map gender, disability and the postcolonial as the geographics of economic contestation (Power, 2001)? How are the current forms of technoculture changing the ability/disability paradigm; are these forms liberating, homogenizing or complex forces? As participants in technoculture, are all of us, no matter what our socio-political locations and embodied experiences, more or less complicit in imperialism?

An assessment of disciplinary resistance to intersectional approaches is necessary to meet the challenges of the twenty first century. Geographic as well as architectural studies of postcolonial space, especially dealing with issues of accessibility for the disabled, is necessary and crucial in assessing new modes of barriers and openings for the public participation of the disabled as citizens. Moreover, (im)migration and diasporic narratives of postcolonial subjects of disability will provide insights into the immigration policies that excluded immigrants with disabilities, as well as locate disabled subjects in spaces of political struggles and as figures shaping historical changes in the laws of the land of migration.

There is much work to be done, and the interdisciplinary articles in this issue begin to open up the space for further investigations. Perhaps through rethinking of our postcolonial identities we can engage in inclusive theories and praxes of decolonization, so that in speaking about the rights of some of us, we do not silence the rights of many others of us.

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