introduction

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Our initial call for papers invited attention to the cultural and biopolitical techniques that secure ablebodiedness and personhood and continue to damage and stigmatise disabled people. We took early inspiration from Nasa Begum's article 'Disabled women and the feminist agenda', published in *Feminist Review* in the early 1990s. As well as calling for analysis of 'the diverse and complicated issues' (Begum, 1992, p. 71) that affect disabled people of colour, Begum argued that the concerns of disabled women were marginalised in both feminist and disability politics. We hoped that more than two decades later, a themed issue of the journal would build upon Begum's insights and expose the ways in which matters of ablebodied normativity have been, and continue to be, hidden in plain sight in an array of feminist projects and theories. The call spoke our feeling that there was more to say about the ongoing and trenchant critique of the bounded autonomous and stable body, global dynamics of care and capacity, and dissections of the barely acknowledged pull of the fantasy of enduring ablebodiedness. In keeping with recent work that has challenged and complicated the valences of the medical/social models of disability for capturing non-normative embodiments, the pieces in the issue share a concern with the felt politics of dis/different-ability across a range of sites. These explorations reflect a desire to be accountable to both the recognition of vulnerability, pain and suffering (psychic, social and embodied) *and* the honouring of 'complex embodiment' (Siebers, 2010), experiences and capacities, without assuming to know in advance where these might be found.

Our initial sense that *Feminist Review* needed to foreground and explore questions of disability and debility says something about our location in Britain. At this time, critical disability politics in relation to austerity economics and changing welfare regimes has lent a sense of urgency, or even desperation, concerned with the imminent loss of many hard fought (already not overly generous) provisions and entitlements (see Shildrick, this issue). This is simultaneous with increasingly ambivalent and stigmatising sets of dominant cultural images concerning disability (see Briant *et al.*, 2013). Take, for instance, how athletic prowess and 'supercrip' narratives of overcoming circulated—though not entirely without nuance—in the 2012 London Paralympic Games. Alongside 'disability nationalism' (Garland-Thompson, 2014), the Games materialised usually implicit matters concerning taxonomies and degrees of both dis/ability and prostheses. Events were graded according to different kinds of impairment (visual, intellectual, stature, limb functioning) and their temporalities (stable, subject to change). The various prosthetics used by some athletes, particularly the 'blade runners', who use carbon-fibre 'Cheetah' blades, became both a prurient media spectacle and a source of scientific controversy. Yet,

as Shildrick and Price (2006) point out, all bodies are necessarily a part of interdependent alliances and prosthetic extension. Normativity works by making this interdependence invisible:

It is difficult to draw a meaningful distinction between, for example, a disabled person's use of a voice synthesiser and the growing use of text messaging, between reliance on a hearing dog and riding a horse, between the amputee who uses a wheelchair cart and the executive in a speedboat, or between the wearer of corrective orthopaedic boots, and an athlete's high-tech sprint shoes. All extend the bounds of possibility by making connections—by both organic and technological means. (Shildrick and Price, 2006, n. pag)

Lury (1997) has further suggested that our everyday use of prostheses has implications for how we understand agency, individual rights, social inclusion and exclusion, providing insights into the making and regulation of bodies and selves. In prosthetic culture, Lury (1997, p. 3) contends, the Cartesian 'I think therefore I am' is replaced with a subject who is constituted in the relation 'I can, therefore I am'.

If we think of dis/ability operating as a bio-semiotic network or intersection of alliances, so that there are degrees rather than states of dis/ability (Puar, 2009), we all have unstable bodies and health (McRuer, 2006). Nonetheless, these instabilities and vulnerability are denied. As Garland-Thompson argues:

One of our most tenacious cultural fantasies is a belief in bodily stability, more precisely the belief that bodily transformation is predictable and tractable. Our cultural story of proper human development dares not admit to the vagaries, variations, and vulnerabilities that we think of as disability. (Garland-Thompson, 2007, p. 114)

What techniques, we wonder, are used to achieve and secure abled bodies across different domains of social life? What might it mean for feminist and crip activism to work with and against the political tensions in the 'I can, therefore I am' and to recognise 'vagaries, variations and vulnerabilities'?

It was perhaps ironic that the Paralympic Games coincided with a palpable discursive explosion in Britain of negative 'welfare cheat', 'drain on the state' types of media representations of the lives of people with disabilities. The neo-liberal modality enabling such narratives has a broad bio and geopolitical reach. It chimes with some theoretical moves that have attempted to think through the ways in which such understandings work on the scale of populations more broadly and also those not claiming or identified with disability or disability rights perspectives. Indeed, an emphasis on debility, it is claimed—as 'the impairment, lack, or loss of certain bodily abilities' (Livingston, 2005, p. 113)—enables precisely this shift in scale, affording greater recognition of geo-social forces and circuits. It is significant to note that Julie Livingston's theorisation of debility was based upon ethnographic research in Botswana. For Livingston, debility in Botswana is inscribed by the cumulative effect of unbridled capitalist exploitation and rapid industrialisation (and 'circuits of toxicity', Livingston, 2012), which have resulted in populations whose ordinary lives persist with injury, poverty and loss, without qualitative improvement.

It is noteworthy that among our contributors, the term debility garnered much more systematic attention than the term frailty. A number of the articles are concerned with the current configuration and use of the term debility, particularly its possibilities and limits in relation to the articulation of feminist concerns with the politics of disability. Yet, 'frailty' is surely a gendered term. In some contexts it includes connotations of the fetishisation of weakness and fragility as ideal classed and racialised femininity. It also has medical/clinical and technological associations with incapacity. The doctor Gawande (2014, p. 34) has described how frailty 'happens to power plants, cars, and large

organisations'. With humans, frailty is attrition: 'We wear down until we can't wear down anymore', Gawande writes (*ibid.*, p. 34).

These different associations may in some way account for what we felt (at least by default) as a resistance to tackling frailty in our initial call. Considered through the lens of a critical concern with the multiple disidentifications and what crip theorists refer to as 'compulsory ablebodiedness' (McRuer, 2006), perhaps we might speculate on the challenge the less than normatively robust body (whether disabled or not) poses? This is significant in its connections to what might be termed the ableist imaginary, both within feminism and more generally. It suggests that bodily weakness, susceptibility and suffering are surely still immensely powerful in ways that call for ongoing critical interrogation (see Baril, this issue) and for attention to the historical legacy of words in the present (Clare, 1999).

Our sense is that the politics of debility and frailty are vital for feminisms because of shared concerns between feminist and critical disability politics, including contestations over such matters as reproductive rights, sexuality, care, autonomy and relationality, rights and social justice agendas. In addition, challenges to normative definitions and restrictions of various forms of embodied subjectivity (including classifications of 'the human' and 'the person') play a crucial role in feminist as well as queer and crip theory. These latter three bodies of work and activism, as Kafer's scholarship (2013) exemplifies, speak to one another in important ways. We feel that the gendered dimensions of the terms 'debility' and 'frailty' are also worth considering further, especially in their relation.

As a fascinating text from 1830 (already by then in its twentieth edition) *The Aegis of Life*¹ exemplifies, there is a co-constitution of anxieties over sexuality and gendered expressions of productivity and fitness in the utilisation of the concepts of frailty and debility. These find expression in the history of sexuality in the equation of (sexual) debility and (human) frailty with forms of sexual dysfunction caused by (among other things, including 'intense study') indulgence in 'self-abuse'. This connection is perhaps provocative for feminist and queer theory because of the ways in which it calls attention to the masculinist assumptions that undergird the language of health and vitality. It also illustrates, in a classic Foucauldian manner, how discourses surrounding sex and sexuality are produced and animated within a field of power, which bind the sexed and gendered body to the productive economy. This binding is taken up by several contributors, together with the histories and contexts that have produced ideas about disability, health and power through asymmetries of privilege. Politics is conceived in such discussions, in an expansive way, to indicate the sense of a commitment to understanding and analysing structural power relations and how they are felt and embodied in diverse and changing ways. 'Gender reaches into disability; disability wraps around class; class strains against abuse; abuse snarls into sexuality; sexuality folds on top of race... everything finally piling into a single human body', Clare (1999, p. 127) observes. 'To write about any aspect of the body, means writing about this entire maze' (*ibid.*).

Critiques of compulsory ablebodiedness, as some of the articles that follow demonstrate, minimally include attention to the material conditions of knowledge production. In keeping with other forms of

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¹The full title (which also serves as a form of advertising) is *The Aegis of Life: a non medical commentary on the indiscretions arising from human frailty in which the symptoms and baneful effects of self abuse, intemperance and libertinism are explained in a familiar manner: to which are added very extensive practical observations on Sexual Debility, and its attendant sympathies*. The authors, who appear to have had it privately printed, are 'Goss and Company consulting surgeons' (London, G. Booth, 1830).

production, these tend to invisibilise bodily concerns, be these proximate or discrete (experienced by the self or in relation to another). It would be perilous to ignore the tensions here in how this special issue 'about' disability is organised around these negative terms. This might be read as potentially erasing aspects of critical disability and crip theory, particularly the fundamental challenge to normative and ableist assumptions about the value of disabled and crip lives.

Indeed, the shadow of denigration, devaluation and death galvanises the field of disability thinking. The phrase 'nothing about us without us' suggests, for example, both alliances and scepticism. It calls attention to the ways in which speaking of disability can easily slip into speaking over or for those most closely affected. But who is the 'us' here? And what kinds of claims to an 'us' can be sustained in the light of a robust critique of compulsory ablebodiedness and emerging discussions of debility (Puar, 2009)? This critique includes an engagement with how some aspects of disability theory reproduce hierarchies of disability, where intellectual or learning disabilities or painful and 'unhealthy' conditions are marginalised. Is this an area where matters of debility have some considerable purchase, foregrounding as they do the idea that debility is both individual but also social and connected directly to intersectional patterns of privilege and power?

Not all of the articles and Open Space pieces in the issue speak from the perspective of identification with disability, although a number of them do. This too raises questions about the relation between feminist and disability scholarship. As editors our connection to these issues is marked by different intellectual and experiential engagements with disability, debility and frailty. However, none of us, at the time of writing, identify as disabled. It would be naïve to assume that our engagement is unmarked by ablebodied privilege and in ways that we do not yet recognise. These questions of standpoint and situated knowledge and progression at the expense of others are familiar feminist concerns. They demand that we pay attention to voice, epistemic privilege and the question of location. We hope that this issue opens up rather than closes down conversations about what might constitute a renewed feminist effort to be more questioning of our investments in an unreflective ableism, as well as being more attuned to the global politics of disability and debility.

themes of the issue: debility and its discontents

A number of key themes emerge from the issue. Building on, responding to and questioning work by theorists such as Puar (2009, 2012, 2013) and Berlant (2011), a number of the articles pick up on the relationships between debility, economics (and ideologies of neo-liberalism more generally) and biopower. In particular, they explore the idea that debility might open up possibilities to erode binary distinctions between ablebodiedness and disability, while also raising questions about the medical and social models of disability. Indeed, a number of the articles explicitly engage with Puar's (2009, 2013) articulation of debility as a concept that blurs the borders between being disabled and not-disabled, reconfiguring the contemporary terrain of disability and identity politics. Puar has been careful in how she imagines the relations between debility and disability activism:

The political mandate behind such ... a move from disability to debility ... would not be to disavow the crucial political gains enabled by disability activists globally, but to invite a deconstruction of what ability and capacity mean, affective

and otherwise, and to push for a broader politics of debility that destabilizes the seamless production of abled-bodies in relation to disability. (Puar, 2012, p. 166)

For Garland-Thompson, the shift that Puar instigates from *disability* to *debility* is not unproblematic. However, she recognises how debility can hold

theoretical promise even while, and perhaps because, it abandons the strategically crucial categories of disability identity, the very unstable binary upon which the social justice logic of late modernity now rests. So *disability* wanes while the more accurate and stable concept of *debility* ascends, leaving at risk both accommodation and inclusion for people identified either socially or legislatively as *disabled*. (Garland-Thompson, 2014, n. pag)

Several of the articles that follow investigate the ambivalence of the conceptualisation of debility. They ask searching questions as to what might be at stake for people with disabilities (and who may or may not experience disability as ‘debilitating’) in these debates. A second, related theme emerges with regard to lived time or temporality, with multiple strands engaging with a generational politics of care, crip time and the challenge to normative imaginaries offered by ideas around ‘slow life’ versus slow death (see Anna Hickey-Moody, this issue).

Feminist disability scholarship has a long-standing investment in the interrogation of the question of autonomy, relationality and care, and the contributors offer new perspectives on these perennial concerns. Finally, questions and reflections in a variety of forms of cultural production, from poetry and photography to film and performance, also emerge here, emphasising the powerful role played by arts practices in the imaginings and reimaginings of diverse lives.

The question of the relation between debility and biopower and its operations in institutions such as the military and hospitals is a concern shared by Harriet Gray’s piece on militarised masculinities and the management of trauma by the British Army and by Ulla McKnight and Annette-Carina Van der Zaag’s piece on the management of HIV in a London clinic. Gray’s focus is on the political implications of the British military’s Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) approach to those suffering from combat-related mental health debilities. The article argues that efforts to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness in the military cannot be read outside of the wider political frame that puts those bodies into combat in the first place and works in the interests of securing the ‘frames of war’ (Butler, 2009) to delimit the possibilities of opposition through increased individualisation. Gray makes a convincing case for how the intersections between TRiM and hegemonic masculinities play an important role in legitimising militarism.

In the case of the measurement of the HIV virus in pregnant women, McKnight and Van der Zaag describe the technological co-production of the virus through Barad’s (2007, p. 169) concept of ‘agential realism’, where ‘Apparatuses are the practices through which ... divisions are constituted’. The possibility of the virus being detected at all is dependent upon codes of meaning inscribed into the viral load ‘assays’ (tests) used by the clinic. The authors show how the choice of assays used materialise into differentiated possibilities for the management of illness and its outcomes for both the mother and the baby. These are differences that reproduce global dynamics of privilege. The argument offered is that debility, far from reflecting a deficit, becomes the very mechanism through which life itself (the baby’s) is enabled. The technologies of recognition are therefore revealed as profoundly double edged. An implicit problem that underlies McKnight and Van der Zaag’s paper is the problem of normativity, outlined by Emden (2014, p. 1) as how to ‘obtain an understanding of the sources of normativity without appealing to normativity as a

standard separate from the agency, affects, conceptual commitments, and also cells and organs, that make us natural beings'. In different ways both of these pieces stress the ways that an analytical frame of debility can be used to uncover the contemporary workings of biopower.

Elsewhere in the issue other institutions are held to account. For example, the institutional barriers to inclusion in relation to education in both schools (Gupta) and the academic life world (Huijg) come under scrutiny for the disconnect between the possibilities offered by critical thinking on disability and the failure to facilitate full participation in these settings. These two Open Space contributions render very clearly the internalisation of perfectionism and the isolation of the fight required to produce inclusion; the different ways that inclusion is imagined and produced across different contexts; and the attendant pain and exhaustion of the fight.

Margrit Shildrick's piece raises critical questions about how the theorisation of debility maps onto the politics of disability in the specific context of Britain, and does not shy away from the ongoing privileging of global North perspectives within critical disability studies. She highlights how a globally oriented perspective of debility has the potential to challenge the geo-social inequalities that shape the ways that disability is experienced, differentially. Crucially, Shildrick's article shows how both non-normative and debilitated embodiments provoke psychic hostility, precisely through a disavowed recognition of shared (albeit unevenly) states of precarity and vulnerability.

This theme is also evident in Kateřina Kolářová's piece 'Grandpa lives in paradise now', which investigates the usefulness of conceptualisations of debility for considering new formations of global care wherein novel patterns of precarity and vitality play out. The example explored is residential care homes in Thailand, which support people from Western Europe who have dementia. This is revealing of the scope for considering the layers of capacity and debility that are involved in such transnational encounters, as well as the ways in which these can be read as specific to the context described but also significant for the ways in which settings are criss-crossed by global flows. Kolářová's analysis allows for an exploration of these dynamics as containing continuities but also differences from (other) colonial pasts and presents.

This emphasis on the contemporary manifestation of longer patterns of coloniality chimes with the concern with temporality. A number of authors engage with two key and overlapping interventions, the idea of 'prognosis time' and that of 'slow death'. Prognosis time is originally described in Sarah Lochlann Jain's exploration of the temporal dynamics and experiences of life and risk, where in the global North, biomedical innovations—screening programmes, DNA testing, prognostication—are creating a foreshadowing of death (see also Gunaratnam, 2013). Taking cancer as her example, Jain asserts that we are 'living in prognosis'. Prognosis time anticipates the future. But it does so through levels of abstraction and chance that simultaneously bring death close and make it impossible to fully understand and grasp. As Jain sees it:

Statistics seem to present us with a certainty, such as '1 in 207 women who are 35 years old will be diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer'. But it says nothing about who will represent the one, so it also carries the counterfactual hint that it might be somebody else ('why me?') ... Like car-crash deaths or suicides, the individuated counternarrative folds into the magical inexorability of the aggregate. (Jain, 2007, p. 85)

This focus on cancer has been widened by Puar in her consideration of the affective dynamics of debility to render globally distinctive probabilities, risks and prospects of life and death. Prognosis time is explored in

this issue, for example, in relation to the spectre of dementia currently haunting much of the global North's imaginary of its future. Such haunting is explored through cultural narratives of dementia in Japan (Sako and Falcus), as well as in the interpellations of the marketing of the Thai care homes (Kolářová). Generational questions too are addressed through both of these articles in the gendered, racialised and classed questions of caring, autonomy and personhood that dementia produces. Cultural narratives of dementia and the gendered dependency on family care in Japan are the basis of Sako and Falcus' article. Japan, the authors tell us, has one of the fastest ageing populations in the world, combined with an extremely low birth rate. Issues about care for older people are key economic and social concerns, and a collective and individualised sense of crisis is present in Japan's cultural life, giving rise to a new genre of 'care-giving' fiction. In a nuanced analysis of a novel, film and comic book, Sako and Falcus consider the potential of these texts to reconfigure and resist popular stigmatising tropes of dementia.

Berlant's (2007, p. 754) concept of 'slow death' as 'the physical wearing out of a population' is featured in several of these discussions. Berlant uses slow death to describe the normalised and dispersed erosion of marked, unmarked and 'ordinary' bodies through literal consumption (her focus is obesity). In Berlant's analysis such erosion testifies to the stealthy and deadly effects of structural inequality. The concern with matters of pace and time in debility are further examined critically and through a very different lens, in the photo essay by Marie Max Anderson. The essay centres upon visual images of the twisted bones in her mother's feet. The arresting photographs map a terrain of pain residing in one body but stalking another, linking generations through a heritable condition.

Margrit Shildrick questions what a shift to debility might mean for disabled subjects where, sometimes, as she notes, death is not so slow. For Anna Hickey-Moody consideration of the phenomenological difference of 'intellectual disability' suggests that slow life rather than death offers valuable possibilities for contesting the normative imaginary. Her account of 'an ecology of sensation' stretches the conceptual vocabularies through which those with and without cognitive disability might enter into a space of recognition and validation not rendered plausible within the confines of the 'productive' model of the neo-liberal mantras of profitability.

Ambivalence over the usefulness of the term debility for the ongoing projects associated with feminism and queer feeling also emerges in Lisa Blackman's discussion of her long-standing engagement with the Hearing Voices Network. Blackman interrogates the relation between critical thinking and experience and 'the emergent discourse of debility'. Her contribution questions how frames of debility fit with the theorisation of lives lived with psychosis and temporal dissociation 'in the context of negative states and affective politics'. How far does the focus on debility as a site for a speculative framing of the future, as already fully ensnared and broken down by capitalism, help those for whom the 'politics of recognition' is an ongoing and difficult struggle? How well can debility as a concept address the injustices done to others? And what unwanted effects of minimising 'the politics of entitlement, status and appropriation' might ensue in destabilising existing associations of the 'hidden injuries of neo-liberalism'?

Kay Inckle's essay is more forceful in its disidentification with the politics of the move from disability to debility. Inckle proposes thinking with an analogous (although not unproblematic) relation between white and able-bodied privilege. In her rejection of Puar's theoretical substitution of disability with debility, Inckle points to the unfinished work that disability rather than debility does in ongoing struggles for social justice and recognition. This reading of debility stresses the continuities with a longer-standing 'negation

of the disabled body' and proposes caution in working with theoretical innovations that threaten to obscure and obdurate ongoing oppressions and privileges. For Inckle, it is a critical interrogation of compulsory ablebodiedness that is more urgently needed than a retheorising of disability as debility.

By contrast, debility is understood as a more useful concept for thinking through the deficiencies of the medical/social model of disability in Alexandre Baril's piece on trans embodiment. This essay reflects on the challenge to models of disability that have either failed to recognise the social aspects of medical models or to attend sufficiently to questions of pain, loss or being 'pissed off' (as Rahila Gupta suggests in her Open Space article). Baril's argument is that although disability studies is concerned with bodies that differ from ableist norms, this concern does not extend to markers of sex/gender, so that 'a bodily difference involving the hand, back, and so on, is the domain of disability studies, but the moment genitalia are involved, these differences become the concern of trans, gender and sexuality studies'. Baril's auto ethnographic account calls for the recognition of both cisgender oppression of trans people and ableism within trans movements, while responding to the call of crip theory to image 'bodies and desires, otherwise' (McRuer, 2006, p. 35).

The contributions in *Frailty and Debility* then are by no means settled on the value and usefulness of these conceptual framings, for thinking through the relation of feminism to diverse embodiment, 'bodily misfortune' (Livingston, 2005) or mind and body diversity and difference. Nonetheless, together they demonstrate the centrality, indeed the imperative, of keeping these questions and concerns at the forefront of feminist politics.

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