

<http://somatosphere.net/2018/12/disability-from-the-south-toward-a-lexicon.html>

## Disability from the South: Toward a Lexicon

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By Michele Friedner and Tyler Zoanni

In this series, we work to broaden the horizons of an emergent anthropology of disability[1] by taking two considerations as the starting point for a conversation. On the one hand, we respond to Jean and John Comaroff's (2012) provocative call for "theory from the South," or grounding the location of social theory-making outside dominant Euro-American spaces, assumptions, and priorities. On the other hand, we consider the implications of the fact that most scholarship on disability—both ethnographic work as well as interdisciplinary disability studies—has taken place in Europe and North America, where the vast minority of people with disabilities actually live. Taking up invitations to think about disability in "local and global worlds" (Ingstad and Whyte 2007), including those settings in which the "local" and "global" are entangled or can't be easily distinguished, we begin to answer what changes in understandings of disability when the research is located in places marked "Southern."

The contributors to this series engage this question in light of ethnographic fieldwork in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America: What do theorizations of disability as a form of human difference gain when grounded in "Southern" locations? How might such theorizations, and their accompanying concepts and categories, look different depending on locale? In this engagement, contributors draw on fieldwork across multiple domains of social life, including kinship, economy, politics, personhood, medicine, and infrastructure. All of them work to address the problem that, as James Staples and Nilika Mehrotra (2016, 40) note, most work on disability is "framed against the backdrop of American campaigns for civil rights and the independent living movement." We likewise take inspiration from Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2007) influential work on the importance of "provincializing" Europe and consider how we might allow other disability trajectories to come to the fore, trajectories in which the disabled people outside Northern countries are not just waiting to follow in the paths of their more-developed counterparts.

Taking up such provocations, we call this series "Disability from the South: Toward a Lexicon." As befits a series oriented around lexicon, some words are in order about our own key terms—that is, about our title.

First, South: Reversing dominant hierarchies of knowledge and power, the “South” may be thought of as a frontier as opposed to a margin, a center instead of an outpost, and as ahead instead of behind (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). Yet both “South” and “North” are perhaps best understood as heuristics for thought and action, not as places, things, or essences. It is in that spirit that we invoke them here. As Helen Meekosha and Karen Soldatic (2011) argue, using the framework of “North” and the “South” can be a strategic shorthand, designed to foreground global inequalities and forms of structural violence. Such a framing may also foreground the differences that arise from varying historical trajectories, cultural sensibilities, and forms of social organization. At the same time, we and the contributors to this series resist simple naturalizations of the North-South dichotomy. One way we short-circuit an essentialization of the South is by including scholars working in regions often understood as “East” in order to modulate, and perhaps scramble, the production of binaries. More generally, while mindful of the need to reckon with the general dynamics of what have been called the “postcolonial locations of disability” (Barker and Murray 2010), including histories of war, dispossession, and racialized violence, we work to avoid homogenizing portrayals of “the southern space” as one of generalized poverty and abjection (Grech 2016, 3). Acknowledging a point made by Mark Sherry (2007) about literary tendencies to use disability as a metaphor for colonialism, we refrain from collapsing differences between colonialism and disability; to be colonized is not the same as being disabled, though there are no doubt complex relations between these two processes. We take seriously the relationship between disability, impairment, and colonial and postcolonial poverty, and we also ask, “What else?”

Second, in addition to engaging conceptions of the “South,” contributors attend to the category of “disability,” considering the work that this category does in both our diverse research sites and on a global scale. Increasingly concerned about its simultaneous lack of specificity and its entrenchment within the framework of liberal identity politics, some scholars have chosen not to use “disability” and have instead mobilized vernacular categories, classifications, and logics. This is not simply about some fetishization of the local; instead, it is a refusal to reproduce universalized disabled subjects, and to remain open to forms of disabled subjectivity and belonging that do not neatly map onto the teleologies of disability arising from Northern settings. That said, it would be a mistake to ignore the ways disability has become a global social fact. More specifically, disability has been rendered into a universal category via policy instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and its presumed universality ostensibly allows for direct comparison between bodies, laws, and infrastructure. As various forms of comparison are inherent in a discussion of “Northern” and “Southern” locations—not only North and South but also universal and

particular, rich and poor, local and global, and so on—there is need for exploring the work that comparison does for disabled actors, international organizations, and civil society in specific places, alongside anthropological engagements.

Third, “lexicon”: Taking inspiration from the edited volume *Keywords for Disability Studies* which offers concise engagements with important concepts in disability studies such as “access,” “institutions,” and “passing,” our contributors offer up other kinds of keywords and key phrases from our distinct research sites. In their introduction to the *Keywords* volume, Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (2015, 1) write that their goal is “collaborative, interdisciplinary attempts to revisit categories, concepts, and assumptions that define disability and the experiences of people with disabilities more broadly.” Our series adds to this focus on revisiting categories by attending to the ethnographic particularity that we find often lacking in work that attends to “disability in the Global South.” The goal of this series is to think not only of the difference that disability makes but the difference that it makes in specific places. Rather than stopping with sweepingly general categories, we analyze what categories mean and do in specific places and how they might become something else entirely. In doing so, contributors attend to the specificities of the contexts in which we work and the tensions between the specific and the general. For example, Zhiying Ma discusses the meaning of “family” in relation to disability, paternalism, and the state in China, thereby offering up a distinct reading of what is at stake in a particular disability world. Similarly, Sharon S. Marie offers an interrogation of the concept of “interdependence” in the context of signed language interpreters’ interactions with Deaf Vietnamese people in order to examine how relations are maintained and sustained between these two groups.

Last but not least, the prepositions—“from” and “toward.” We deliberately don’t write about disability “in” the Global South because such a spatializing preposition connotes encapsulation, containment, fixity. Of course, “from” has its own challenges. For one, we are conscious of the fact that many of the contributors included in the series are not *from* the locations in which they conduct research, and this matters. Second, as is true for more general proposals about theory from the South, there is always the danger that “from-ness” takes on an extractive nature, in which the lives of disabled people in the majority world are appropriated as data or evidence for the theory- and career-making of Northern scholars. As we acknowledge those issues and neocolonial dangers, we emphasize that this lexicon is neither exhaustive or final, nor is it meant to be: with “toward” we signal the initial nature of our efforts. We choose “from” and “toward” alike to evoke a sense of movement and relationality, to mark a starting point for inquiry and action, but not to overdetermine what may

arise. It is in this spirit—of opening up new conversations, orientations, and possibilities for disability theory, politics, and world-making—that we offer this series. The key terms and phrases we gather here are meant to stimulate a conversation, not to be its last words.

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## Note

[1]See Ginsburg and Rapp 2013 and Kasnitz and Shuttleworth 2001.

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["Disability from the South: Toward a Lexicon"](#) is a series edited by Michele Friedner and Tyler Zoanni. Contributors in this series consider what changes in theorizations of disability when research is located in places marked "Southern" and offer reconfigurations of keywords and concepts typically utilized in the study of disability.

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