

Disability Culture in Jim Ferris's *Hospital Poems*

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Abstract:

The advent of disability or crip poetry in the last decades of the twentieth century has become a crucial literary trend in contemporary American literature equally profound and socially influential as protest poetry against ethnic, racial, class, or gender discrimination. Within a culture that is dominated by identity politics, categorizing diverse communities based on their ethnicity, color, gender, or religious affiliation, disabled poets found in poetry a powerful instrument to express their bitter experiences and the suffering of their disabled bodies. Challenging the confinement of marginalization, contemporary American poets such as Larry Eigner (1927–1996), Vassar Miller (1924-1998), Laura Ann Hershey (1962 –2010) Jim Ferris (1950-), Kenny Fries (1960-), and Jillian Weise (1981-) have established a new poetics of disability as means of resisting ableism or ableist societies, which consider the non-disabled individuals as the only accepted normal living beings. Their poetic works function to provide a new perspective about disabled people, deconstructing the static cultural presumptions of bodily normalcy to create a disability culture.

The purpose of this paper is to explore Jim Ferris's poems of disability, selected from his *Hospital Poems* (2004), arguing that disability is a social and cultural imposition much more than simply a state of body functionality. The paper also endeavors to bear evidence that disability poetry is a sharp manifestation of artistic creation rather than social or personal desperation. A non-normative experience of the disabled individual is to be discussed as an essential factor for constructing disability culture.

Keywords: Ferris, disability poetry, disability culture, ableism, normalcy

Introduction

Reading different literary works across history, one can determine the stereotypical way with which disability is employed. The portrayal of deformity, blindness, paralysis or mental illness of individuals with prosthetic limbs, or any kind of impairment body function is usually attributed either metaphorically to characters of evil or villainous nature or literally as disability of war injury. In both cases, disability is depicted as negativity as we find in Aeschylus' *Oedipus*, Shakespeare's *Richard III*, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, etc. In some other works, disability is represented with sympathy and sentimentality as we find in Wilfred Owen's anti-war poetry of World War I aftermath. But it was the last half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st that different representations of disability in literary works emerged due to the rise of the Disability Rights movement in the 1960s. In the United States, the Disability Rights Movement came to be acknowledged by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, stating in 1975 that "all persons with disabilities have the same rights as other persons;" a statement that enforces their right to be respected for their human dignity (Britannica). The impact of this vital movement can be seen in Ferris's poetry as a representational example of this disability poetics.

In "Crip Poetry, or How I learned to Love the Limp", Jim Ferris defines disability or crip poetry as:

poetry that seeks to explore and validate the lived experience of moving through the world with a disability. Sometimes referred to as crip poetry, disability poetry embodies a disability consciousness; it is informed by and contributes to disability culture. That is a serviceable definition. But here's what I left out: the possibility, the edgy potential, the openness, and even likelihood of transformation. (Ferris, 2007)

Based on this definition, crip poetics emerged to raise awareness about people of disability in a culture that perceives the disabled as incompetent or simply different from the notion of normalcy. As Ferris puts it: "crip poetry comes from the outside, it comes from the abnormal, it is centered in the experience of being out of the ordinary" (Ferris, 2007). It stems from an extraordinary experience and consciousness of disability, yet it is directed to both, the abled and disabled at the same time.

In *Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability*, Jenniffer Bartlett and Shiela Black, the editors of the book support the objective of making visible disability experience that stereotypical cultural notions tend to keep it invisible. By choosing poets with a visible disability, they underline the embodiment of disability poets that aim at establishing self-definition through impairment. In the preface to the book, Bartlett states that many of the poets they have chosen for their collection "while still employing a narrative form to explore disability, do not necessarily make this the central focus of their work. Yet many of these poets are heavily informed by lyric poem and often use this lyricism to celebrate the non-normative" (Bartlett et al., 2011, p.17).

This paper focuses on Ferris the poet and the disabled, who is Lucas County's poet laureate and the Ability Center Endowed Chair in Disability Studies at the University of Toledo. His poetic output belongs to an artistic movement created by disabled writers in the last decades of the twentieth century whose objective is to re-identify the individuality of the physically disabled. Kobus Moolman describes Ferris as one of the chief theorists of what he calls 'crip poetry' — who sings the body broken in true Whitmanesque fashion (Moolman, 2014, p.2) However, the main aim behind disability poetics is not merely to establish an artistic movement, but to represent bodily difference through poetry; rather than evoking pity or sympathy towards disability, disability poetics projects a generative factor for poetic artistry and social transformation.

This kind of poetry established itself to give voice to the hushed voices of the disabled and promote their self-definition. It endeavors to transform lives of disability as well as liberate stagnant cultural and social notions from seeing disability as shameful, pitiable, or insignificant. Undeniably, such poetry has the potentiality to make a difference if not drastic changes in modern societies; it can find its way into the minds of its readers, unfolding the real experiences it carries of its disabled poets. They are poets who either were born with a disability, or chronic illness, or came to be disabled at a certain part of their lives. Disability poetics, accordingly, refers to a poetic approach to body impairment and its impact on constructing the subjective identity of a disabled individual. It is also a poetic style that is closely connected to this kind of diversity, which also influences the body of written poems. As Ferris writes, "I'm not sure if I want all poems to limp, but I know this: all the interesting ones do, all the lovely ones do, in one way or another" (Ferris, as cited in Koppers, 2007, p.93).

Ferris himself suffered from a childhood spent in hospitals where doctors tried to resolve the problem of one leg of his that grew faster than the other; every year his left leg was measured two, or three and one-half inches different from the other. His disability haunted him all his life as he says in "The Enjambed Body: A Step Toward a Crippled Poetics":

I was quite young when I started wearing a built-up shoe on my left foot, so young that I don't even remember. Starting at nine, with the advent of the brace, I began wearing only shoe poses: school, church, play, gym class. Early I made an aesthetic decision: my nonmatching shoes, my uneven feet did not matter. I was a born loser that counts, so I decided to pay it no heed. Ever since it has been difficult for me to concern myself with appearance in general, but especially with feet- as in wearing shoes and socks that match. (Ferris, 2004, p.223)

Finding oneself in a culture that identifies and categorizes its citizens on the basis of their ethnicity, color, gender, and even their health or body condition must be of a crucial impact on their self-construction as individuals. Such negative perception makes impaired individuals as pitiful confined within their body disability or chronic disease. However, Ferris never accepted the parameters of his physical status, turning them into means to create crip poetry that became in service of

promoting disability culture. Such a culture would recognize the value in its most invisible citizens whose impairment or physical limitation can be the very reason to contribute to social life once they are fully integrated. In this respect, Ferris asserts:

We. I presume, I claim an "us," even though there are myriad ways of embodying (and denying) disability, and no two disabled people's experiences are the same. Disabled people are well schooled, whether impairment is acquired early or late, to identify with and aspire to be as much like nondisabled people as possible. (Bartlett et al., 2014)

This is how disabled poets try to make their artistic work a means for self-definition and a way to be members of contribution. Eigner who was born paralyzed due to a failed forceps delivery; Miller, who suffered from cerebral palsy since the moment she was born, Hershey who tolerated spinal muscular atrophy all her life, and several other disabled authors who submitted neither to their disability nor to the stereotypical perception by which they were perceived or judged.

Ferris, Poet of Cripples:

Because Ferris was born with one leg shorter than the other, he was compelled by his disability to experience what is it like to live in a culture that over-shadowed those with impairments, striving through poetry to find a meaning behind his life:

When I walk, my left knee points one way, my left foot another, my right foot still another. Don't worry—I usually manage to get where I'm going. But when I walk, some part of me is mindful of the output of energy, mindful of the pressure my brace puts on odd spots on my leg, mindful of the years of sores and scars and pain that have been some greater or lesser part of walking for me. I may enjoy the walk –I may even walk for pleasure - but when I walk, I aim to get somewhere. If my meters are sprung, if my feet are uneven, if my path is irregular, that's just how I walk. And how I write. (Ferris, 2004, p.228)

Understanding Ferris's poetry, the reader is invited to see it from the prism the poet himself sees the world, an outlook reliant on the way he walks, moves, and finds his way. It is a matter similar to finding balance through collecting fragments, random pieces, shattered sentences, and curvy lines to construct integrated bodywork. The very fact of being obliged to wear an orthopedic shoe that made Ferris walk quite unlike other people has significantly influenced his crip poetry. Jillian Weise, an American disabled or 'amputee poet' says something similar: "A poem is a walk". In her "Biohack Manifesto," she expresses: "A poem is like going on a walk/A walk is like a poem/ I was walking the other day and a poem tripped me--"(Weise, 2019,p.70). In other words, disability poetry interconnects stories of disability with writing. Poetry becomes an embodied experience of crippled body and disability becomes a poem incarnated. Therefore, Ferris's publication of *Hospital Poems*, the Winner of the 2004 Main Street Rag Poetry Award and "the widely discussed in disability studies classrooms throughout the nation" manifests not only Ferris's experience of disability but a disability of consciousness that cripples (Kuppers, 2014).

Before going into the distinctiveness of Ferris's poetry it is crucial to point out disability poetry was inspired by the Disability Rights Movement, which commenced by disabled American and British activists who strove since the late 1960s to call for the rights of the disabled. The movement activists were themselves influenced by the African American Civil Rights movement in the United States of the 1960s. Their peaceful marches and demonstrations protested against the silence imposed on the people of impairment, the cultural and social marginalization they suffered, and the scarce medical care they were given. Facing widespread discrimination practiced against them, including blind citizens and disabled veterans, the disabled activists underlined that it has become their mission to achieve recognition of their disability as an identity in itself. Edward Verne Robert (1939-1995), the activist leader of the Disability Rights Movement who suffered paralysis from the neck down due to Poliomyelitis, infantile paralysis, called disabled people "one of the largest minority groups in the nation" (Nielsen, 2012, p.68). He advocated an independent identity for the disabled, protesting against the assumption of considering them as helpless cripples

In the 1960s and 1970s, disability studies have underlined the need to liberate disabled people from the limitations by which they were confined, taking them out of the "medical model" that "imbues disability with negative meaning by stigmatizing disabled people as damaged, inferior, and in need of rehabilitation or a cure" (Krentz, 2018,p.350). These studies endeavored to present a new anthropological, intellectual, and social outlook about people of impairment, liberating them from being considered mere people with bodies outside the norms. Similar to identity politics studies, they endeavored to dive into the complex space of ableist societies that diagnose the disabled as the different 'Other'. The main target of disability studies is to redeem ableist societies from social prejudice that discriminates people of impairment in favor of healthy or abled-body citizens. They have emerged to form an integral part of the social and cultural demands for acknowledging the dignity of the disabled, focusing on the importance of embracing pluralism and the unordinary. This activism continued until the 1990s, achieving to bar discrimination against disabled people as part of the civil rights law of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Eigner Fries was the first to publish his collection in 1996 in which he puts the body at the center of his disability experience, manifesting that there are
 No words unbend my bones.
 Beauty is a two-faced god,

So each night, naked on my bed, my body

doesn't want repair, but longs for innocence. If
 innocent, despite the flaws I wear, I am beautiful. (cited in Bartlett et al., p.21)

For the same purpose, crip poetry, as Ferris calls it, endeavors to create a manifesto, not to propagate disability, but to make the invisibly disabled people visible, and to give voice to the silenced disability culture that ableist society tends

to ignore. Like the Black Arts Movement that protested against the discrimination of blacks and against considering blackness as an inferior or ugly human quality in comparison to Whiteness, crip poetry protests against classifying disability as a humiliating or pathetic aspect of the individual. In other words, it challenges ableist societies that tend to stereotype or stigmatize people with disabilities; instead, it embodies them as life-affirming figures of unique identity.

The illness of disabled poets, as Miho Iwakuma states, “ceases being an absurd fact, and destiny to become a general possibility” (Miho, 2002, p.79). That is to stay, disability or crip poetry establishes the relationship between the pain of physical impairment and creativity. It transforms the melancholy of illness into a method of poetic aestheticism as Ferris exclaims in his opening poem of *Hospital Poems*, “Poet of Cripples,” saying:

Let me be a poet of cripples,
of hollow men and boys groping
to be whole, of girls limping toward
womanhood and women reaching back,
all slipping and falling toward the cavern
we carry within, our hidden void,
a place for each to become full, whole. (ix)

The speaker identifies himself as the poet of cripples as the title displays, yet in the first line he seems to ask for permission to be the mouthpiece of hollow individuals who lamely walk, striving to reach the ‘cavern’ and the ‘hidden void’ within them; a hidden place in which their very weakness lies, ‘room of our own, space to grow in ways’(ix). Out of this place of incompleteness, real growth can emerge in people of disability. In the different types of impairment, the speaker of the poem sees various realms of growth:

The space for growth is in the hollow itself, in the delicious absence that creates the echoing chamber: in the o's of 'whole', the expansiveness and breathy rolling of the 'room's oo.... call me to tighten up. That hollow, that absence is for me the enabler of longing: the piece missing from wholeness which keeps tumbling humanity in motion. (Kuppers, 2007, p.91)

How can disability or tumbling humanity be in motion? That motion seems to be springing from some room in an asylum or a hospital, finding its way from a crippled body that does not seem quite hollow after all.

Moreover, the deep space from which the act of motion commences is not apprehensible to the abled or to the normal who sees the disabled as abnormal or different:

unimaginable to the straight
and the narrow, the small and similar,
the poor, normal ones who do not know
their poverty. Look with care, look deep.
Know that you are a cripple too.
I sing for cripples; I sing for you. (ix)

Interestingly, in the last part of the poem, Ferris unswervingly says to those who consider themselves ‘the normal ones’ somewhere in the interior side of their humanity, they are ‘cripple too’. It sounds quite intensive, yet he does redeem it simply by being the bard singing for them too. Although the poem is a song that seems Whitmanesque in nature, celebrating cripples in disability culture, there is no sense of oneness of which Walt Whitman sings: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/And what I assume you shall assume,/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you". (Whitman, 1986,p.13) Although the message of the poem is extended to all people, the oneness between the singer and the people Ferris sings for seems to be established only amongst cripples.

Taking into consideration that *Hospital Poems* is all based on the poet’s memories of a lifetime experience he spent in hospitals, the reader is taken into a place that is strange and strikingly dominated by people with white coats who have the power over the corporal dimension of the patients. Through the narrative and colloquial language Ferris uses, he incorporates physical disability with poetry, ironically giving the disabled bodies an active role in reinforcing their humanistic and social value.

Hospital Poems, “a memoir in verse,” as Ferris calls it in his collection (iiv), outpours itself out of a disabled perspective, particularly a perspective of a crippled child. The hospital, which is the dominant conceit of the collection, is the place in which this child is treated as a specimen under the microscope or a figure on a stage at which people in white coats are looking as spectators. The sense of alienation and fragmentation is closely integrated into the prose-like language, line breaks, and rhythms that tend to internalize the meaning into the reader. The reader can sense the enclosure of the speaker as he experiences physical pain, disintegration, and the indifference with which his disabled body is treated.

Ferris gives voice to a crippled child by employing line breaks or enjambment, as Robert Wallace states in *Writing Poems*: "Lines that end without any parallel to a normal speech pause are called run-on or enjambed" (Wallace & Boisseau, 1996, p.4). His poems foreground disability experience by the flowing of sentences without a pause beyond the end of a line to enhance the sense of motion as well as the crippling of his lame foot. Through the continuity of the thoughts, irregular rhythm, and the poems’ syntactic structure, he endeavors to bring forth to the reader the value and the strength of disability experience, creating a sense of empathy.

In "The Hospital's Milk," the voice of a twelve-year-old lad expresses a yearning for having full-fat milk, instead, he is supposed to follow a strict diet. The whole point, however, is not a matter of skimmed or full-fat milk but a matter of placing the importance on the way hospitals nurture directly or indirectly the effect of disregarding the abnormality of the body: “At twelve I am put on a thousand-calorie-a-day diet. Skim/milk at meals; few sweets. Already I loathe my body;/ the hospital supports this conclusion” (26).

The hospital as a medical institution is the place in which Ferris spent his childhood near doctors and nurses who did several operations "to fix him, to make

of him more like a 'normal kid,' says Paul K. Longmore in his forward to Ferris's *Hospital Poems* (Ferris, 2004, p.vii). In this medical institution, Ferris realized that medical specialists were the very antagonists in his story of disability. They were part of the journey, yet not to lead it to its harbor and help to overcome its difficulties: "This course of corrective treatments utterly failed to achieve its medical goals, let alone its social ones. It did not make him over physically, it could not make him over socially" (Ferris, 2004, p.vii). That is to say the hospital which is a place of potential physical and social transformation for the disabled turns to be a mere lab where the latter is put under minute examination as a specimen.

In "Standard Operating Procedure," Ferris draws a detailed picture on how doctors were trained to do the correction of a crippled leg by the use of an electric drill; the drilling is interconnected into the lines of the poem with different pace and different rhythms:

Take your very best electric drill, the variable speed, reversible one.
Pick out a five sixty-fourths inch bit. Dunk
it in alcohol and put it in the drill. Close the chuck,
squeeze the trigger. Working OK? Good.

Take a young boy and lie him down on your workbench.
Tell him this is for his own good, this will hurt
you more than him. Tell him. Then press the drill
to his thigh and squeeze the trigger. Keep drilling
until you get through the bone. (44)

The drilling, as the title indicates, is a regular procedure done for the crippled child's own good, fixing his disability according to the demands of the sociocultural canons. What the doctors do not say seems to be a central part of the procedure and the treatment of the body of the patient, ironically to enhance its possibility to be functional. Indeed, the whole poem represents the painful experience the disabled live in a so-called normal society.

In an interview with Nicelle Davis, Ferris refers to "what doctors are trained not to say," exclaiming that "one of the most telling things about any socio-cultural milieu is what is unsayable. Learning what one can and cannot say is a crucial part of understanding the rules for social engagement, how to live in that social space" (Davis, 2019). That is to say that Ferris uncovers the discriminatory of medical practice on bodies that do not fit the accepted social notions. He endeavors to "eff the ineffable," as he puts it "to say and shout that which is unsayable. There is incredible power in doing that." (Ferris, as cited in Davis, 2019)

The lived experience of a disabled body that Ferris enforces in the poem is dynamically presented in social and cultural context, stressing disability politics that goes to the extent of becoming an animal-like consideration of the crippled patient. The inflicted pain, as well as the sense of indifference to difference, are equally emphasized:

He'll be out for a while, but dose him with morphine

for his trouble. He won't remember much; kids are like animals that way. Anyway, you had a job to do. You'll go on to many new operations; soon, you won't even remember that leg, let alone that boy. Tears and pain are standard operating procedures, and you have other problems now to solve.(44)

As Ferris describes the procedure of fixing a leg, he uses words, line breaks, rhythms, and punctuations in a way to draw attention to the machinery of operating. The poem itself becomes the chart of the operation itself through which Ferris attempts to say what is not said in an ableist culture. The vulnerability of the disabled body becomes in itself a challenge against the norms of traditional poetry and against a culture that favors normalcy to difference. As Ferris puts it:

Disability is dangerous. We represent a danger to the normate world, and rightly so. Disabled people live closer to the edge. We are more vulnerable, or perhaps it is that we show our human vulnerability without being able to hide it in the ways that nondisabled people can hide and deny the vulnerability that is an essential part of being human. (Ferris, as cited in Bartlett et al., 2014)

This denial of the disabled is unfolded in "The Coliseum" in which the hospital is compared to coliseum, a place where patronizing doctors and nurses are described as a group of

professionals, lords of the hospital, cold-eyed
white coats trained to find your flaws, focus on failings,
who measure your meat minutely. You are a specimen
for study, a toy, a puzzle—they speak to each other as if
you are unconscious
already, but for commands. (42)

The speaker expresses his anger and pain versus a world that sees him with a marginalized perspective being just a 'specimen' to do some studies on. As Ferris usually uses a single-stanza that varies between lyrical and free-verse style, he also moves between humor and pain to exhibit his hospitalization as a place where doctors "measure your meat minutely" (42). The expression of this dark humor reflects Ferris's childhood memories of disability, which are the very material of his collection with the setting of a hospital as a place of sheer 'humiliation' similar to a "parade of shame"(42).

The very title of the poem "Coliseum" stands for a historical location of ancient Rome, a grand arena in which professional beast fighters combatted with wild animals or starved beasts were set free against condemned men used as bait. Even if the coliseum is not mentioned in the poem, the hospital is perceived as this arena where the disabled are shamed before a public scene. It can be quite an exaggeration on the part of Ferris to use such an analogy to refer to the relationship between doctors and the disabled children, a gladiator-animal relationship. However, this perspective is supported in all the *Hospital Poems* as Longmore states: "The child's sense of being at the mercy of all-powerful adults who impose their will for the child's own good, and are often wrong" (Ferris, 2004, p.vii).

Similarly, the child-speaker refers to himself as a kind of slave under their commands, saying:

..... stand, bend, walk this way,
on this leg, on that. They forget about you for long
stretches, a kind of mercy, while you stand bare naked,
while they rehearse and renew your shame. (42)

Through the usage of imperative verbs given with a sharp ironical tone, the speaker underlines the act of performing before public eyes. This very treatment seems to determine the disabled child's identity and that of the other patients in the hospital. He is put at the center as if amid the coliseum, standing bare and feeling

.....so happy to be out
from scrutiny, so happy even for ugly clothes, for underwear,
so happy to get back to your pen, back to the ward where you are
one among many, just another kid,
almost a person again. (43)

Ferris plays on the words 'pen' and 'ward'. Literally, the latter refers to a hospital block in which several patients share the same room to which the child-speaker wants to retire to be one like any other disabled child. The word 'pen' combined with the word 'ward' does refer to the act of writing, the very feature that self-identifies an author as a recognizable person versus an identification by negation. On the one hand, Ferris, implicatively, emphasizes how poetry can arise out of disability; on the other, he expresses a rejection to be defined in terms of what he is not in comparison to others.

A zoo-like correlation between the disabled and the people with white coats is denoted in "Abecedarius Hospitaler" in which figures with white coats are fully focused on "the specimen on stage." The disabled child shivers and hardly holds on as he is exposed to a constant examination of X-rays:

.....- it still ends in
Vomit and pain, but for me, not for them,
Whatever they decide they keep their coats,
X-rays, tools and tricks, and I know my place-
You're up there, kid - and my job- to be the
Zoo animal, so I pace, I shiver, I don't cry. (52)

The speaker does not express imprisonment under a crippled body but mainly under a medical process that leaves him silenced and positioned by a biased outlook, indicating the incapacity of people to accept different human beings. Why would a physical disability limit the way people are recognized? Why would the hospital, a place of potential safety and health betterment, increase the physical and social pain of a crippled child and inflict more disablement?

The hospital is compared to "A small sea of white coats, mouths and eyeballs" (52) in which everything is misty and drifting to no safe decisions. Doctors do not seem good wayfarers; their decision-making regarding the physical normalization of the child's body keeps deviating into mere speculation, putting him under the spotlight:

New problem, this puzzle with a name. Cut
 Or not cut-- that's never the question -- it's
 Places to cut, which bones to saw first -- that's the
 Question, but this sea is dense and the mist
 Rolls in, it always rolls in, and whatever
 Safety the white coat provides melts down
 To nothing, the sea is no safer than
 Under the cold spotlight. (52)

“Abecedarius Hospitaler” is also about the sense of division that separates the disabled from others as they represent stereotypical social notions, which normalize the disabled based on identity politics. As Petra Kuppers states in “Performing Determinism: Disability Culture Poetry”: “it’s not my body or mind that’s the problem, it is these steps, this sign, your stare, your words” (Kuppers, 2007, p.91). The acute division and the cage-like barriers the white coats people impose on the disabled are the very reason to place the latter where he keeps deviating and rolling into a wild sea rather than reaching a safe shore.

The barrier between a world of normalcy and the disabled is also highlighted in “Patience.” The hospital is portrayed as a rocky promontory, a cliff that is about to crash into the rocks:

The hospital is on a promontory jutting
 far out into the ocean. We’re on a cliff, about
 to topple into the waves which smash against the rocks.
 We can’t even see across the street—there is no street,
 no one can reach us, the thin tongue of land behind us
 has crumbled into the sea. (p.6)

Two worlds are combined in the poem to augment their detachment; a violent and deviating world of the hospital and another of the outside. The first is supposed to be a world of refuge and safety but thrown like a ship into a dangerous ocean away from the outside world which seems distant and unreachable. The doctors, on the other hand, move on a steady rhythm, and serenely protected:

The doctors have lit out for shore—we can see
 their boat, their white coats in the far distance. The nurses
 pound the waves in an open boat behind the doctors,
 their white caps serene, protecting them from the weather.
 Our island washes away beneath us, wave by wave
 it gives us away until we slide down what is left
 of the cliff into the alien sea and bob there.(p.6)

The poem unfolds a paradoxical atmosphere of chaos and stillness, stormy sea and safe shore that puzzles the reader and makes it difficult to identify the physical and metaphorical space of which Ferris locates himself. In this respect, Kuppers comments on the poem that:

The melody of those lines mitigates my other readings of this poem, the danger, breaks, crashing, smashing, those aliens, that lack of rudder. There are two pulls for me: chaos and calmness, and I can choose as I read. For

there's still a wave I catch here, in the "we," the "our": these are shared adventures, as islands give way, to rocking sounds, not to lonely thoughts. I listen beneath the words, listen to sounds and rhythms, and find a different tune. (Kuppers, 2004)

Beneath the puzzlement the poem creates, there is also the experience of the 'we,' of companionship of disability that the reader can recognize within the hospital's borders that is quite in opposition to the split the speaker envisions between the doctors and the disabled patients.

It is worth saying that Ferris never attempts to present in his poems a stereotype image of pitiable, pathetic, tragic and brave disabled figures that are patient enough to stand the social, psychological, and physical pain inflicted on them. Even if the speaker of his poems suffers from the zoo-like gaze with which he is looked at, this gaze is controlled by the very disabled child himself. The very disability experience is poured out through this child's standpoint which generates not only a poetic authority but also breaks the authority of the ableist society that usually takes lead in imposing presumptions. In doing so, Ferris's poetry provides the possibility of crossing identity politics, deconstructing the improper notion of disability that persists in the mind of the public today. His poetic voice aims at familiarizing disability and reconstructing a new mind's ability to comprehend it. Crip poetry, thus, as he claims "shows disabled people taking control of the gaze and articulating the terms under which we are viewed" (Ferris, 2007).

In an attempt to challenge current public stereotypical conceptions of disability, Ferris denounces any sense of pity that would offer; for him, it amplifies the violation of normalization doctors practice on the fragility of the disabled body. In "Mercy" in which normalcy is identified with shame and a gaze of degradation, the speaker refuses any gesture of sympathy or mercy given by the outside world:

A Get Well Soon card as big as a door.
I want to run, but I can't even walk.
And they see me—I am naked and strange,
pinned to my banana cart. Stuck. Dumbstruck.
How did these aliens get in? How can they breathe
in here? This world is not open to you—
leave now. (p.18)

Once again the zoo-like atmosphere of the hospital is portrayed where visitors come to pay a look at the children behind the bars. It is interesting to refer to visitors as aliens or "trespassers" who "seek to gaze/ on my humiliation" (p.18). The title becomes so ironic since that sense of mercy is not found within the hospital borders, thus, it is rejected even if it comes from outside it.

By revealing a sharp detachment between these two worlds, Ferris accentuates how the outside world is more sealed off in comparison to the world of disability: "The outside world is not open to you--/ We are so strange." The speaker belongs to a crip culture that can exist only in a realm where one can "retreat to the still of the linen room /and look out the window until full dark" (p.19). It can also exist amongst "Adjustable backrest, wheelchair wheels, push yourself/ around,

wheelchair for those who do not fit/ into wheelchairs, wheelie machine” as Ferris writes in “Banana Carts” (p.48).

The world that determines disability experience is also displayed in “Exercise of Power.” The lyrical ‘I’ and pronoun ‘we’ equally reveal a strong sense of imprisonment within the walls of the hospital, ironically called ‘the green sanctum’:

But the green sanctum with tile walls was never open—
I could never see much through the glass, never enough
to shake the fear or let me know what really happened
in that room where everyone wore a mask. We were not
to loiter on our rare trips up to the second floor. (p.24)

The speaker’s alienation in which he is enclosed is demonstrated within a place that “I would have hidden away” (p.24) and where power would never permit the ‘we’ to ‘loiter’ or move or wander or stroll outside the hospital ward. It is a place that is based on conforming physical disability to the external social and cultural demands, a place where powerful people of masks, having the mission “to fix what is wrong with us” (p.24).

Accordingly, there is a powerful sense of rejection of the hospital medical treatment, a matter which indicates a refusal of any given healing process. For Ferris, the hospital does not only stand for a medical institution but also outdated cultural and social established notions of disability. He reinforces the tension between the crippled speaker and all the medical atmosphere as a world that anchors the disabled within a stereotypical image of difference and indifference, making the outside world inaccessible. The sense of dehumanization that Ferris’s poems underline communicates a rejection of an ableist culture that does little to rise into a disability culture of encounter or solidarity that embraces the ‘Other’. In September 2020, he exclaims in an interview that

Disability culture is ignored at best, misunderstood, or maligned. If we just look at how people are being positioned during the current coronavirus pandemic, disabled people are again among the last to be considered. (Fletcher, 2020)

Through Ferris’s disability experience, a perspective free from social or cultural prejudices is presented to give voice to disability culture that strives to be acknowledged. His poetry is not written to propagate or sentimentalize disability to raise sympathy towards disabled people but rather presenting a literary platform to challenge the cultural and social norms that would label alterity by bodily impairment. It is the endeavor to promote a healthy culture of inclusion, empathy, and solidarity that respects the distinctiveness of disability. This distinctiveness characterizes the experience of every disabled as Vassar Miller says in her poem “The common Core”:

No man’s sickness has a synonym;
No man’s disease has a double.
You weep for your love, I for my limbs—
Who mourns with reason? Who over whims?

For, self-defined as a pebble,
 No man's sickness has a synonym. (Bartlett et al., p.54)

Ferris rejected any imposed cultural, social, or political restrictions that tend to determine or label his self-definition based on his disability. His awareness of his body limitations, as well as its potentialities, makes him believe in the possibility of transformation: "But what we can accomplish within those limits must not be constrained by the limits in the thinking of nondisabled people-and even the disabled people—around us" (Bartlett et al.,p.90). That is to say, body impairment is never a reason to block one's creativity or his capacity to develop; having a disabled body does not mean having a disabled mind. Out of the idiosyncrasy of his body, Ferris demands the need to create a poetic space for poems of disabilities, space from which change can bloom and crip poetry may keep finding its way into the world. In "Poems of Disabilities," Ferris exclaims:

I'm sorry—thus space is reserved
 for poems with disabilities. I know
 It's one of the best spaces in the book,
 But the Poems with Disabilities Act
 Requires us to make all reasonable
 Accommodations for poems that aren't
 Normal.....
 There is a nice space just
 a few pages over – in fact (don't
 tell anyone) I think it's better
 than this one, I myself prefer it.
 Actually I don't see any of those
 poems right now myself, but you never know
 when one might show up, so we have to keep
 this space open.
 you're reading along
 and suddenly everything
 changes, the world tilts
 a little.... (Bartlett et al.,p.93)

By referring to Poems with Disabilities Act, the speaker raises the question of the civil rights law of people of disabilities that need to be more activated and acknowledged in contemporary societies. Ferris enforces this Act by the power of the space given to crip poetry. It can be the space given to a disability poem in a book, or in a literary sphere that is dominated by normalcy, or space through which disabled poets may be more recognized. Keeping the space open to disability poetry means keeping the possibility of changing the disabled mentality of contemporary societies.

Crip or disability poetry, thus, has the task of producing art that breaks the notion of cultural or social conformity of identity, implementing new spaces in the contemporary world for a new perspective of disability. As Ferris affirms that:

When I first wrote what I called “crip poetry”I wanted to see, particularly a flowering of poetry that did not make a big deal of differences called disability but did not take them for granted either. A poetry that grew out of disability culture, that didn’t have to be “about disability” all the time but didn’t shy away from it either. (Bartlett et al.,p.91)

His aim is to create disability poetics that valorizes alterity and non-normative experience, style, language, and thinking. It is not an attempt hide behind words but to use them to embody diversity, foregrounding a marginalized voice in the face of contemporary ableist attitudes.

There is no doubt that Ferris's poetry demonstrates a mixture of fragility and strength, visible disability and hidden power, balance and imbalance, as well as health and sickness. However, through these oppositions, his disability poems undermine traditional assumptions and the established certainty of normalcy. Lacking symmetry in one’s life or body means having a different standpoint. Living with disability means endeavoring to believe in different abilities. Mind and body are inseparable; being crippled or blind or deaf does not mean having no intellect; each is empowered by the other. The disabled, after all, is afflicted with pain, not by choice. He/she can be a father or mother, brother or sister, or friend to us. By joining our voices to the voices of the disabled poets and accepting their new interrogations about disability, a community of equality and a culture of encounter can be constructed to make a difference towards a healthier world and healthier mentality.

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ثقافة الإعاقة في قصائد المستشفى لجيم فيريس

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الملخص:

أصبح نشوء شعر الإعاقة في العقود الأخيرة من القرن العشرين اتجاها ادبيا بالغ الأهمية في الأدب الأمريكي المعاصر، وذا عمق ادبي وتأثير اجتماعي يوازي بأهميته شعر الاحتجاج ضد التمييز العرقي والأثني أو الطبقي أو الجنسي. وقد وجد الشعراء المعاقون في الشعر أداة فاعلة للتعبير عن خبراتهم المريرة ومعاناتهم الجسدية وسط ثقافة تهيمن عليها سياسات الهوية التي تُصنّفُ المكونات المختلفة على أساس اللون أو العرق أو الجنس أو الدين.

متحدين كل أنواع التحجيم والتهميش، أسس الشعراء الأمريكيون المعاصرون من ذوي الاعاقة مثل لاري إيجنر (1927-1996) وفاسار ميلر (1924-1998) ولورا آن هيرشي (1962-2010) وجيم فيريس (1950-) وكيني فرايز (1960-) وجيليان وايز (1981-)، أسس شعريّة جديدة عن الاعاقة كوسيلة لمقاومة المجتمعات التي تعتمد على معيار التمييز بين الشخص السليم أو الطبيعي وبين الشخص المعاق وفق نوع الإعاقة الظاهرة في جسده من عدمها. تعمل أعمال شعراء الاعاقة على إبراز منظور جديد نابع من منظور ذوي الإعاقة انفسهم، منظور يفك المعتقدات والاحكام الثقافية التوصيفية الجامدة والسائدة حول الاعاقة الجسدية لخلق ثقافة قبول الإعاقة.

يهدف هذا البحث الى دراسة قصائد الإعاقة لجيم فيريس المختارة من مؤلفه قصائد المستشفى (2004)، مؤكدة أن الإعاقة في المجتمع الامريكي هي قالباً نمطياً اجتماعياً وثقافياً أكثر من كونها إعاقة جسدية. ويسعى البحث الى التأكيد على أن شعر الإعاقة هو شهادة على الابداع الشعري وليس دليلاً على اليأس الاجتماعي والشخصي. ويناقش البحث التجربة غير المعيارية للفرد المعاق كعامل أساسي لبناء ثقافة الإعاقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فيريس ، شعر الإعاقة ، ثقافة الإعاقة ، القدرة ، الحياة الطبيعية