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Summary of doctoral dissertation

Narrative and Disability: Disability Studies in the Perspective of Engaged Humanities

The dissertation combines a reflection on the status of disability studies with a reflection on the emancipatory activities of people with disabilities, implemented through non-fictional narratives. These narratives are analysed not only as representations of the authors' individual experiences, but also as tools of emancipatory social critique, used to strengthen the emancipation movement. Like disability studies, non-fictional literature created by people with disabilities (re)constructs and presents new knowledge about experience and the body.

In the dissertation its main methodological frame–disability studies–was defined as an epistemic response to the emancipatory activities of people with disabilities. The implications of the commitment adopted by disability studies to support emancipation by generating new, critical knowledge about disability were analysed. These studies are therefore one of the disciplines of contemporary engaged humanities, and the meta-scientific reflection on them allowed to discuss such issues as the agency of science, relations between researchers and representatives of marginalized social groups, or the status of localized knowledge.

The dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first presents a description of the critical paths followed by Western studies on disability, designed as a response to emancipatory activities carried out by people with disabilities in a specific socio-political space. This part of the dissertation describes the circumstances of shaping the social model of disability as an emancipatory perspective, contrasted with the dominant medical model of disability. Also referred to are projects of criticism and deconstruction of scientific methods of using the experience of disability and the disabled body. An important concept introduced in this context is epistemic injustice, understood as a practice of depriving subjects of the right to speak on their own behalf and to create knowledge. The course of one of the first insurrectionary critics of this kind of injustice by British activist Paul Hunt is also reconstructed. What is more, the chapter considers the criticism of objectivity as one of the mechanisms regulating relations in the realm of knowledge.

In the second chapter, the critical paths constituting the literary studies on disability are described. The starting point for the analysis is the criticism of the representation of disability in fictional literature, whose representatives are, i. a., David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, authors of the interpretative concept of disability as a narrative prosthesis. Then, the epistemic-critical potential of non-fictional literature created by people with disabilities was analysed. An important part of the second chapter is the reconstruction of the debate that took place in Poland after awarding the drama "Debil" by Malina Prześluga with the Gdynia Dramaturgic Award in 2020. The debate brought to light many interesting questions related to the ethics and politics of representing the experiences and bodies of people marginalized due to the scope of their (dis)ability.

The next, third chapter describes one of the popular critical and emancipatory strategies in the realm of knowledge about disability. This strategy aims at including in a research project an autobiographical narrative that takes the form of an autobiographical manifesto or autoethnography. This chapter presents and substantiates the thesis about the important role of autobiographical coming-outs in the development of engaged cultural critique that not only privileges a situated and embodied point of view, but also introduces a new epistemic paradigm.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the analysis of three anthologies of texts written by people with disabilities, published in the United Kingdom, Poland, and the United States at various stages of establishing local emancipation projects. Based on these anthologies, the communal emancipatory rhetoric was recreated and described, an important feature of which is the tension between the individual perspective and the collective perspective. In the case of the anthology published in Poland, the main directions of its reception were also presented, and attention was paid to the influence of various paradigms of scientific interpretation of personal narratives about disability.

The fifth chapter deals with non-fictional texts about disability that have a clear social-critical profile. The research attention focuses on Polish reportages on disability, including the features of the reporter's advocacy attitude. Selected narratives of mothers of disabled children were also analysed. These narratives are read against the background of socio-political changes known as the care crisis. The main method of reading in the discussed part of the dissertation is the method of examining the text as proposed by Ato Quayson as a tool for criticising social reality, and not only a tool of representation. In the last part of the fifth chapter, there is a meta-reflection on the practice of advocacy interpretation, involved in the criticism of representation and the dissemination of emancipatory ideas.

The final chapter of the dissertation presents metadisciplinary considerations that focus on the study of disability and the consequences of commitment. This chapter reflects on the shaping of the engaged research discipline within the humanities and the practices of its critical, decolonizing reconstruction. Reflections on the institutionalization of disability studies in Poland were also presented. The chapter ends with considerations on the relationship between engaged humanities and identity politics as social-epistemic strategies of criticizing the dominant narratives about disability.

The dissertation is summarized in the conclusion, which is a recapitulation of the main theses and includes a general reflection on the analytical perspectives used.