

*Decolonizing Literary Interpretation  
through Disability*

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In a 2002 chapter called “Looking Awry: Tropes of Disability in Postcolonial Writing,” Ato Quayson notes that figures of disability proliferate across postcolonial literature in English, identifying a fascinating aspect of the corpus and a productive area for future critical inquiry. Until then, disability in postcolonial literature had received little attention despite the rise of postcolonial studies and disability studies in the prior decades, and despite the fact that approximately 80 percent of the world’s disabled people – more than half a billion people – live in the Global South, often in precarious situations.<sup>1</sup> In their introduction to *Relocating Postcolonialism*, Quayson and coeditor David Theo Goldberg further argue that postcolonial studies and disability studies share many concerns, not least about questions of power and oppressed identities. They call on postcolonial and disability critics “to pursue joint projects of agitation for justice that would embrace the disabled equally with the racially othered, gendered, and postcolonial subject” (xvii). With their words, they helped to initiate a period where a few other scholars explored the rich multilayered depictions of disability in anglophone postcolonial literature.<sup>2</sup> These critical contributions expanded the scope of postcolonial studies, uncovered exciting new dimensions of the literature in English from the Global South, made literary disability studies more global, and called attention to the relationship between literary representations and the millions of actual disabled people around the world, who often confront ableist prejudice and disenfranchisement. Within the larger interdisciplinary field of disability studies, literary disability studies has been an important thread, showing how disability has existed in the human imaginary in the past and how authors have used representations of disability to do cultural work that reflects and sometimes critiques their specific historical moments. In postcolonial literature, often depictions of disability go to the heart of the decolonization process. In my recent book *Elusive Kinship*,

I investigate how authors deploy disability to make more vivid not just the lives of disabled people in the Global South, but also such crucial issues as the effects of colonialism, global capitalism, racism and sexism, war, and environmental disaster. As we consider how to decolonize literary studies and to agitate for justice, we must include disability alongside other vulnerable identities, and strive for more North–South dialogue and collaboration in interpreting texts. Doing so will not just liberate literary studies, but also improve understanding of decolonization and liberation around the world.

### Reading Disability in Postcolonial Literature

One does not have to look far to discern why disability in postcolonial literary works has been slow to receive attention. Both of the two likeliest fields to consider it, postcolonial studies and literary disability studies, emerged in the late twentieth century but at first had little contact with each other. In early decades, postcolonial scholars, like literary scholars in general, had little to say about disability, perhaps because they deemed it uninteresting compared to other pressing issues.<sup>3</sup> Such oversight recalls historian Paul Longmore's observation in the 1980s about disability in media and film; he asks, "Why do television and film so frequently screen disabled characters for us to see, and why do we usually screen them out of our consciousness even as we absorb those images?" (132). We might pose a similar question with regard to postcolonial literature. When postcolonial critics noted disability in the literature, they tended to see it as metaphorical, as emblems of the agonizing experience of colonialism, rather than realistic. Admittedly, many works invite such a figurative reading. For example, in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), the narrator Saleem is born with birthmarks and no sense of smell; as he grows, he acquires partial deafness, amnesia, and other disabilities. Because he was born at the moment of India's independence, he insists that he is "handcuffed to history" (3) and his life is entwined with postcolonial India's. Such a depiction encourages readers to interpret Saleem's body metaphorically. Along the same lines, in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), the significance of the cognitively disabled title character, who also has a cleft lip, consistently eludes others and himself. A medical officer in wartime South Africa imagines himself chasing Michael after he escapes from a rehabilitation camp and futilely calling out "your stay in the camp was merely an allegory [of] how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. . . . Am I right?"

(166–67). The medical officer gives Michael larger meaning even while acknowledging the latter's essential elusiveness, just as many readers are tempted to do. Through such examples, one can see why Frederic Jameson (perhaps too easily) concluded that "all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical" (69). Yet while suggestive, as Clare Barker has pointed out, readings that attend only to the metaphorical leave real-life material disability and disabled people's experience out of the equation, not to mention the relationship of disability to narrative structure: they create gaps in interpretation that prevent full understanding of the literature, of decolonization, and of justice.

For its part, disability studies arose out of the disability rights movement in the United States and United Kingdom in the 1970s and 80s as a small number of advocates sought to take the insights of the movement into classrooms and academic intellectual inquiry. The movement directed attention to how barriers in society, rather than in the body, stigmatized and excluded disabled people, so it turned attention from medical discourse to how societies are organized, including in areas such as architecture, social policy and attitudes, public transportation, and more. In addition, it brought together people with a variety of impairments, causing them to see themselves as part of larger group with common goals in a way they had not done before. Animated by the slogan "Nothing about Us without Us," activists protested for access and equity in all areas of life, leading to such landmark legislation as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Building on these successes, pioneering scholars in literary disability studies examined how well-known works in the Anglo-American canon deploy disability. In the 1990s, they offered groundbreaking readings, especially revealing how depictions of disability aid in the social formation of normalcy.<sup>4</sup> While such analyses were insightful, the focus on Anglo-American texts unfortunately left out other literature in English, other cultures, and by extension millions of disabled people in the world. Anglo-American scholars may have felt unqualified to analyze depictions of disability from the Global South, wary of trampling on Southern ways of knowing and apprehensive of being inadvertently racist, classist, or even in effect "colonizing" literary texts produced in the South. Such reluctance would be understandable, but this omission left a grievous lacuna.

With their call in 2002, Quayson, who is originally from Ghana and now has an academic position in the United States, and Goldberg, who grew up in South Africa but now also has an academic post in America, opened the way for collaboration and dialogue between not just scholars in postcolonial studies and those in disability studies, but also scholars in the

North and those in the South, who together have advanced the critical conversation about disability in this great literature. In the following years, scholars including Quayson, with *Aesthetic Nervousness* in 2007, the British literary critic Clare Barker, whose *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability* appeared in 2011, and the American scholar Michael Bérubé, with *Secret Life of Stories* in 2016, published books that explore disability in postcolonial texts. They investigate works by authors such as Wole Soyinka, J. M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Patricia Grace, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Ben Okri, sometimes alongside Anglo-American writers. Moreover, the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* and *Wagadu* devoted special issues to disability in postcolonial literature, while diverse scholars such as Nirmala Erevelles, Michael Davidson, Shaun Grech, Karen Soldatic, Jasbir Puar, and others have advanced global disability theory in the humanities.<sup>5</sup> Building on this exciting work, I published *Elusive Kinship: Disability and Human Rights in Postcolonial Literature* in 2022, taking on both established (and oftentaught) authors like Chinua Achebe, Rushdie, Coetzee, and Anita Desai, and also younger contemporary writers such as Edwidge Danticat, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chris Abani, Indra Sinha, and Petina Gappah, seeking further to reveal the instructive presence of disabled characters in this literature.

Such scholarship has revealed that, far from being simple or straightforward, representations of disability regularly work on multiple levels simultaneously, signify on any number of matters, and reveal the deepest meanings of a text. In *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Quayson gives examples of a variety of compelling ways that disability shows up in literature, including as a test for the morals of other characters, as a marker of otherness, as epiphany, as a hermeneutical impasse preventing understanding, as giving tragic insight, and as normality. Such a preliminary typology gives a sense of the broad range of cultural significance disability can have in literature. Arguing that interactions between nondisabled and disabled characters, and disabled characters and readers, often produces anxiety, Quayson says such nervousness can lead to a crisis of representation. He concludes by calling for more rigorous reading practices “alive to the implications of disability,” because representations of disability often help to illumine the “ethical core” of narratives that are otherwise easy to miss (*Aesthetic* 208). For example, in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Empire’s sadistic Colonel Joll tortures an Indigenous girl, leaving her partially blind and with damaged ankles. Her physical impairments raise questions about the morality of the Empire’s imperialism and prompt readers to pay close attention to the Empire’s relationship to Indigenous people.

Others build on Quayson's lead. Although she agrees with Quayson's contention that depictions of disability are crucial, Barker disputes the idea of a narrative crisis. She argues that portrayals of child disabled characters in literature from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, India, Pakistan, and Aotearoa New Zealand serve as both metaphoric critiques of "dominant (post)colonial or national ideologies" and empathetic depictions of disabled experience (Barker 26). In other words, she maintains that disabled figures can be both figurative *and* realistic depictions at the same time, even in cases of magic realism. Meanwhile Bérubé calls attention to the way that ideas about cognitive disability can shape narratives through questions about time, self-reflexivity, and motive. All three scholars point to how, even when disabled figures are not present, disability can work at the level of language, metaphor, and shape of a narrative's plot, sometimes simultaneously. For my part, I connect some depictions of disability in postcolonial literature to the gradual emergence of global disability human rights, most prominently in the United Nation's landmark Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, ratified 2008). Such work shows that literary deployments of disability are often both complex and meaningful, meriting our careful attention as we seek a fuller understanding of literature, decolonization, and global justice.

### **Peripheral Everywhere: The Marginalization of Disabled People**

These matters do not just enrich our understanding of literature and any number of topics authors use disability to comment upon, but also relate to one of the most vulnerable groups in the world.<sup>6</sup> Despite encouraging signs such as increased activism, attention, and progress in disabled rights, disabled people everywhere often confront ableist prejudice and oppression. In a world beset by severe problems, from climate change to enormous inequity to the COVID-19 pandemic, it may seem especially daunting to focus on disabled people, but they are of course profoundly affected by larger crises and give us a useful perspective for approaching them. Scholars have long recognized the "vicious circle" that often connects disability and indigence, where disability leads to poverty and poverty leads to disability, reinforcing each other (Eide and Ingstad 1). Problems are amplified by the fact that disabled people are often perceived as useless and unable to reciprocate. In the Global South, they typically have limited access to health care, education, housing, and employment and are among the first to suffer during food shortages, natural disasters, and other emergencies. Disabled women and girls are disproportionately illiterate

and victims of violence, including rape and domestic abuse. As the United Nations puts it, “girls and women of all ages with any form of disability are generally among the more vulnerable and marginalized of society” (UN “Women”). Matters are compounded by the legacies of colonialism, war, and neoliberal economic policies that leave some people behind.

Although these statements convey sobering realities, we should remember that they are broad generalizations that lack contextual detail; they may miss ways disabled people are proactive.<sup>7</sup> For example, in agrarian societies, disabled women often work, but their (unpaid) labor typically is not counted in development reports (Price and Goyal). The Global South contains tremendous variety among cultures, including Indigenous cultures, and practices, which serves as an important reminder to the need for specificity. For this reason, Barker and Stuart Murray call on scholars to practice situated readings when they examine disability in postcolonial literature rather than simply applying grand theories about disability developed in Europe and the United States. Rigorously attending to portrayals of disability in postcolonial literature offers a way for scholars to be precise and avoid generalization.

In world media, disabled people are usually faceless, making it easier for the public to ignore their plight or to assume it is unimportant, but by taking literary deployments of disability seriously, scholars can raise awareness and make a positive difference. Nirmala Erevelles decries how, in Northern media, disabled people in the Global South “face the social, political, and economic implications of being invisible” (133), implications that are almost uniformly negative, as they are cast to the margins or considered disposable. In the face of such invisibility, the attention of scholars to literary depictions of disability in postcolonial literature can raise awareness of ongoing ableism and injustice and make a significant difference. Representations of minority groups in literature, we see repeatedly, almost always reflect reality in some way and how literary scholars read and teach them have consequential real-world effects. Such a statement is as true of depictions of disabled people as it is of other minority groups.

### **Disability in Chris Abani’s *Song for Night***

To illustrate a specific case of how attention to disability enriches our understanding of literature, decolonization, and questions of justice, I turn to Nigerian-American author Chris Abani’s memorable novella, *Song for Night* (2007). The book us takes into a horrific war that is at first so

unspecific as to almost seem universal, but gradually we get clues as to where we are. The narrator, a fifteen-year-old child soldier named My Luck, says we are reading his thoughts in Igbo that somehow – he says he does not have time to figure out how – are translated into English. That he speaks Igbo connects him to the cultural group of the same name in southeast Nigeria; later, we encounter references to the Yoruba and the Hausa, other large ethnic groups in Nigeria, to a divided nation, to pogroms, and to bloody strife between Muslims and Christians. Such ethnic and religious conflict historically took place in the years after Nigerian independence from British colonization in 1960. Later in the decade, it prompted Igbo people to try to secede and form their own country of Biafra, resulting in the Biafran War (as the calamitous Nigerian civil war in the late 1960s is known). My Luck's narration apparently occurs in the war's final stages. Early in the novella, he remembers encountering, with his platoon of child soldiers, a group of elderly women who are eating what proves to be a baby. The grisly scene relates to the debilitating famine that Igbo people suffered as the result of a blockade that federal forces put around their ports; hundreds of thousands of people died of starvation. In terror and disgust, My Luck instinctively shoots the women with his AK-47, one of many appalling incidents he recounts. To tell this nightmarish story about war in the aftermath of independence, Abani employs disability on a variety of levels that add complexity and even lyrical beauty to the spare narrative (which only runs to 146 pages).

Physical, sensory, and cognitive difference show up in many ways that add power to the novella. First, My Luck himself is physically disabled: he can't talk vocally. "What you hear is not my voice," he begins (19). We learn that three years before, at the end of training camp, My Luck and other child soldiers in his mine-defusing platoon had their vocal cords severed, apparently so they wouldn't frighten each other with screams if a mine exploded on them. The image of a platoon of voiceless child soldiers serves as a clear metaphor for how such children and many vulnerable others devastated by the violence of wars do not have a voice in public discourse. They ordinarily cannot represent themselves and remain largely invisible and forgotten. My Luck does not seem particularly upset by his severed vocal cords, perhaps because the whole group shares the same fate. They have invented a rudimentary sign language (which My Luck is quick to distinguish from the more sophisticated sign language his deaf cousin used at school) to communicate with each other. Abani makes that sign language stay at the forefront of readers' awareness, for each of the short chapters is titled with the description of a sign, such as "Dawn Is Two

Hands Parting before the Face,” so disability remains a constant presence throughout the tale (45). In addition, My Luck’s voicelessness gives his inner thoughts a certain eloquence. “There is a lot to be said for silence,” he says, “[it] makes you deep beyond your years and familiar with death” (21). Through disability, Abani, a poet, is able to give his largely uneducated narrator (My Luck went to war at age twelve) thoughts that resonate. A gap exists between the ghastly circumstances My Luck relates and his lyrical language. In this way, disability makes his story more compelling and arguably even helps to humanize him.

In this violent setting, My Luck tries to come to terms with the gruesome events around him and his own self and actions. The narrative opens with him waking up alone after a mine blast; much of the story concerns My Luck’s search for his lost platoon. Along the way, we get flashbacks that help us to understand the ghastly things he has experienced, from the murder of his parents to obscene depravity during the war, as when an officer forces a man to butcher his children with a knife before killing him. My Luck is honest about his own participation in the savagery. Near the beginning he appears a hardened soldier: he calls enemy combatants “scum” and admits that “deep down somewhere I enjoy [killing them], revel in it almost” (12). But increasingly as the narrative unfolds, he expresses weariness of all the hatred and questions his own morality. Near the end, he asks philosophically, referring to child soldiers, “If we are the great innocents in this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practice?” (143). He points to how the chaos around decolonization has led him to perform vile acts, and he goes on to lament his status as a child soldier: “I have never been a boy. That was stolen from me and I will never be a man – not this way. I am some kind of chimera who knows only the dreadful intimacy of killing” (143). In this manner, *Song for Night* gives expression to an orphan who has been forced into a brutal war and who has lost not only his family, but also in many ways his identity.

The novella shows how political decolonization almost always involves violence, especially in the early stages, and that violence in turn disables, orphans, and maims many people, who typically remain anonymous to the public. Drawing on his own experiences with the Franco-Algerian War, Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* asserted a few years before the start of the Biafran War that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon,” adding that it is also a “programme of complete disorder” (27). In presenting the move from colonialism to independence as invariably violent and turbulent, Fanon aptly describes turmoil that is distressingly familiar: the descriptors convey the shocking Hindu–Muslim violence of



partition in 1947 after the British left India<sup>8</sup> and the brutal all-out war that surrounds the teenage My Luck.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Nigeria, the British colonizers artificially decided on the borders of the nation, putting many different ethnicities, who spoke different languages and had different religious and cultural traditions, together. When the colonizers left in 1960, conflict between the groups broke out. During decolonization, colonizers fade into the background, but as My Luck's experience shows, the remnants of imperial practices continue to be deeply felt after independence.

Northern countries beyond the former colonizer, Britain, have a subtle but strong effect in *Song for Night*, showing neocolonial forces after independence and how difficult true liberation is to achieve. For one thing, we learn that many of the weapons in the war come from the North. My Luck tells us of the remarkable guns, ammunition, and grenades that "U.S.-armed enemy soldiers" possessed (28). While the United States government did hope that one unified Nigeria could be preserved, it officially was neutral during the conflict, so it is unclear if My Luck is right here. Britain and the Soviet Union were more active backers of the Nigerian federal forces. Still, possibly US weapons made it to the federal army via the active black market. My Luck adds that France had promised the rebels weapons and that "since land mines are banned in civilized warfare, the West practically gives them away at cost" (47). My Luck's remarks indicate how the United States and Europe contribute to the devastation by providing weapons. In giving mines they deem too barbaric to use themselves, governments and companies in the North demonstrate their disregard for African lives like My Luck's.

Moreover, the strangely sadistic Nigerian commanding officer uses American symbols to get the children to follow his orders, hinting at how the North can even unwittingly enable warped postcolonial identities that complicate decolonization. In boot camp, the man claims to have been trained at West Point (the manual for proper soldierly protocol, he says, tapping his temple, is in his head). Because of his cowboy boots, the children come to call him John Wayne after the American film actor. Despite these elements of legitimacy, the Nigerian John Wayne turns out to be hideously corrupt. Without anesthesia or even explanation, he has a doctor sever the children's vocal cords. In the war, he compels the twelve-year-old My Luck to commit rape before killing the woman. When John Wayne holds a seven-year-old girl named Faith and implies he will have sex with her – "I will enjoy her," he says (40) – My Luck almost automatically kills him (and the little girl too, by accident), and the other children in the

platoon make him their leader. That such depravity could come in the name of a popular American film hero is ironic and conveys both the prestige and haughty destructiveness of the North in My Luck's mind and how it can corrupt Nigerian identities.

Through disability, Abani is able even more forcefully to convey the destructive effects of Northern intrusion and the conflict itself. Along with his voicelessness, the structure of the book, and his interior eloquence, My Luck's disability also serves as material evidence of all the grievous injury and trauma that accompany the war. As ethnic tension escalated before the conflict, My Luck saw each of his parents brutally murdered, deaths that he emotionally struggles to recount. My Luck's pain causes him voluntarily to join the Biafran army, and he says that all the other child soldiers, after losing loved ones, similarly "wanted revenge" against the enemy (19). All the child soldiers and many of the adults, one infers, have been traumatized. In the pages that follow, we see awful mutilation, death, depravity, and hunger take place one after the other in this all-out war. One could say that My Luck's own disability epitomizes all such trauma, makes it personal, hard, and real.

Scholars in disability studies have pointed out how war produces more disability, which Abani abundantly dramatizes in the novella. The narrative illustrates Jasbir Puar's point that war and military occupations often serve as "circuitry" where "disability – or, rather, debility and debilitation – is an exported product of imperial aggression" (89). Puar directly links colonialism and its afterlives to violence that causes disability. For her part, Helen Meekosha cites a stunning estimate that 85 percent of major military conflicts since World War II have taken place in low-income countries, presumably mostly in the Global South (675). In 2008, Michael Davidson noted that there are more than 110 million land mines in sixty-four countries, including 1.5 mines per person in Angola (where 120 people per month become amputees) and one mine for every two people in Afghanistan (170–1). In Nigeria, decades later they are still uncovering landmines from the Biafran War (Durosomo).

Yet importantly, in *Song for Night* Abani does not just deploy disability as a negative entity but instead consistently points at the humanity and worth of disabled people. Such an idea, he shows, is not a contradiction. At one point, My Luck describes a group of disabled children dancing, a surprising scene in the midst of the devastation of the war. A young one-legged girl laughs at the dancers and, when challenged to do better, throws her crutch-like stick aside and joins the circle. My Luck says:

Balanced on one leg, her waist began a fierce gyration and her upper body moved the opposite way. Then like a crazy heron she began to hop around,

her waist and torso still shaking. She was an elemental force of nature. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I have never seen anything like it before or since – a small fire sprite shaking the world and reducing grown war-hardened onlookers to tears. (51)

In this episode, disability serves as an undeniable material sign; the trauma and ravages of the gruesome war are inscribed on the bodies of the disabled children. Yet at the same time and seemingly contradictorily, the girl is a life-affirming figure of irrepressible joy. Rather than summarily relegating disability to the margins or showing it as always bad, the novella presents it as an integral part of people's lives. Disabled people are indisputably human.

As the novella rushes to its surprising conclusion, My Luck slowly realizes he might no longer be alive. As he explains:

Here we believe that when a person dies in a sudden and hard way, their spirit wanders confused looking for its body. Confused, because they don't realize they are dead. I know this. Traditionally, a shaman would ease such a spirit across to the other world. Now, well, the land is crowded with confused spirits and all the shamans are soldiers. (109)

Without a shaman to help him, My Luck's journey proves to be him revisiting sites of past trauma in order to come to terms with them before moving to the next realm. He presumably dies at the beginning of the novella in the mine blast and has been a spirit all along. We get clues along the way: he has a seemingly endless supply of cigarettes; he is rarely hungry; upon seeing him an elderly woman says "*Tufia!*," an "old word for banishing spirits or bad things" (84); and when challenged to step across a line if not a ghost, he cannot do it. In the final lines, he rides in a coffin across a mystical river to find his mother, young and smiling. She hugs him, calls him by name, and tells him he is home. My Luck concludes: "I am trying to make sense of it, to think, but I can't focus. 'Mother,' I say, and my voice has returned" (167).

It could be called an overly sentimental ending, and some readers may have reservations to his disability being removed in a way that will satisfy ableist assumptions, but after all the horror of the narrative it gives undeniable peace and closure. Moreover, while the novella presents My Luck's satisfying end, it also implicitly presents all of the other remaining people still injured and traumatized by the conflict, including the other voiceless child soldiers in the platoon and the dancing disabled girl. The effects of decolonial violence will not quickly go away.

Abani's short novel may also demystify master narratives produced in the North, especially since he writes from personal experience. In his 2007 TED talk "Stories of Africa," he explains that he was born in 1966 (in Igbo territory), near the start of the war, and for a year during the hostilities his British mother traveled with five small children from refugee camp to refugee camp to get to a place where they could fly to England. At each camp, Abani says, his 5'2" mother faced down military men who wanted to take his older brother, who was nine, and make him a boy soldier. For Abani, the subject is deeply personal, but it appears he added the severed vocal cord part to achieve his aesthetic vision and grasp readers' imaginations even more fully. The family did make it to England and then after the war returned to Nigeria, where they must have witnessed the destruction and trauma after the conflict first hand. The Biafran War happened during the American fight in Vietnam, and Abani wrote the novella during the United States' Iraq War, disastrous examples of American intervention abroad.

In these ways, disability in *Song for Night* serves as a focal point for many aspects of decolonization. With disability, Abani finds an unusual way to make My Luck's story unique and powerful. Readers care about his fate (despite the harrowing brutality in the story, college students respond well to the tale). My Luck's eloquence and severed vocal cords make him serve as an apt representative of all the voiceless people in the Global South harmed by colonialism and its violent afterlives. It humanizes disabled people, reminding us of their often-faceless presence throughout the Global South. It portrays the grievous situation of child soldiers, too; despite human rights interventions, Mia Bloom reports that the number of child soldiers has risen over the last twenty years, indicating how this dynamic is still a problem. Starting with disability, readers come to see that colonization does not simply end with independence. My Luck's narrative makes us aware of how decolonization can lead to violence, corruption, and vile acts and that Northern intrusion continues. Considering disability in *Song for Night* can thus yield numerous insights for how we understand anticolonial resistance, including that true decolonization is often violent and painful.

Other postcolonial novels also point to how attending to disability can deepen our understanding of the varied complications of decolonization. Some quick examples: Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* presents Uma, a woman with learning disabilities and epilepsy in late twentieth-century small-town India, where "modern" (usually British) and traditional notions of gender coexist. Her parents allow Uma to try school, but she

cannot leave home until she marries; as she struggles to find a place for herself, Desai implicitly asks readers to think about what decolonization means in terms of gender expectations and roles. On another continent, Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* presents Nyasha, a bright, independent girl who is the product of two worlds (Zimbabwean and British) that near the end of the novel drive her into mental illness and an eating disorder. Considering her fate forces readers to contemplate the complexities of decolonization in a global world. Meanwhile, in Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People*, a boy in India named Animal has a bent spine and goes about on all fours due to a disaster at a nearby chemical plant owned by Americans. Based on the tragedy at Bhopal, Animal's disability and narrative raises questions about transnational neoliberalism and the continuing effects of global capitalism after formal colonization has ended. These examples are just a few to give a sense of the vast range of depictions of disability in postcolonial literature and the equally numerous ethical questions they raise.

As we seek to decolonize literary studies, we must attend to disability. Doing so will not only make readers more aware of the humanity and diversity of disabled people in the Global South, but also open up any number of pressing topics, from gender roles to neoliberalism, from war to racial relations, related to decolonization. That will cause readers to read more closely and carefully and to consider the complications of achieving decolonization in our current chaotic world. We need to give teachers the knowledge to be confident about helping students through the intricacies of these complex portrayals. Only by concerted dialogue and attention to literary deployments of disability, and more provocative works like *Song for Night*, will we continue to move toward true decolonization of literary studies and liberty for all people.

### Notes

1. For a useful discussion of global disability statistics, see Arne H. Eide and Mitchell Loeb, "Counting Disabled People."
2. As I discuss more below, these scholars include Clare Barker, Michael Bérubé, and me.
3. Perhaps, too, they felt unsure of the language best used for such depictions.
4. I'm thinking here especially of Lennard J. Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997), and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000).
5. Because new work in this area is constantly appearing, any listing is partial and incomplete.

6. The phrase “Peripheral Everywhere” is from the title of a James Charlton essay that traces the marginalized status of disabled people around the world.
7. Not surprisingly, some literary representations of disability can reflect these stereotypes and be quite flat.
8. The 1947 partition of India left between 200,000 and 2 million people dead and another 14 million displaced (Doshi and Mehdi).
9. The Biafran War historically killed between 500,000 and 2 million civilians (many by starvation).

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