

WHY THE “DIS/ABILITY SERIES” AS A TITLE?:

ANSWER AS EXCERPT

—from “Prefatory” in *Constructive Negativity: Prize Culture, Evaluation, and Disability in Canadian Poetry* (Palimpsest, 2019)

Perhaps you are wondering why this section title has a slash through it. I’m happy to oblige with an explanation: for some in the fields of dis/ability studies and dis/ability justice, the prefix *dis* is *dissatisfying*. The *OED* suggests a basis, for its 1(d) definition explicitly signifies negativity: “with privative sense, implying removal, aversion, negation, reversal of action.” I personally like the “negative” sense of *dis* because many of the most important things I have done in my life fall into the category of resistance and refusal. (Admittedly, it has its darker side. I might sometimes like to feel negation but I do not enjoy being negated.)

Yet another sense the *OED* applies to *dis* is: “2. As a living prefix, with privative force.” The Oxonian lexicographers intend “living” to mean that the prefix can be used widely and generally throughout the language. In this, I see the permeation of my people throughout society and the inevitable general fate of the human being to experience dis/ability at some point in life.

Ultimately, I dislike *dis* because it isn’t sharp enough. I use the term “dis/abled” based on my lived experience as a man with affective chronic illness who has created difficulty for institutions (CanLit, medicine) and people because of active suffering as “problem body-mind” but also because of activism conducted on behalf of problem body-minds like mine. My usage is an offshoot of Margrit Shildrick’s nomination of “dis/ability” as a term that, by virtue of its forward slash, suggests “where the grounds for disconnection and categorical demarcation are more directly contested.” Rather than deal in categories that work with the norms of able-bodied and disabled, Shildrick uses the term to reflect both the “provisionality” of able-bodiedness but also “the imbrication within difference that weaves together two apparently distinct forms of embodiment.” I use the term in these senses also, but with some supplementary valencies: I freight the productive opposition I have faced as a disabled man in the prefix; the affective impediments to social relations I have faced in the prefix; the disruption dis/ability studies has effected within the norm with the slash (as if it is a mischievous and ironic divided-by sign); and I give the norm its due with the unmolested, yet abutting, noun. Or, if you will: all the negative connotation of *dis* is shoved, with the slash’s knife-edge, at the throat of smug, default *ability*.