

Disability, Bodies, and Otherness: An Interview with Kenny Fries

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aspeers: How would you introduce yourself to an audience that is new to your work?

Fries: For close to three decades, my work has looked at how disability provides an understanding of the connections between individuals and also between different cultures. I have used the prism of my life as a writer who lives with a congenital physical disability to forge a new understanding of a wide range of values and ideas, from systems of interdependence to the intersection of multiple identities to Darwinian evolution to eugenics. Although each of my books has a different narrative structure, and uses a different metaphor as an organizing principle, each uses disability as the linchpin to open up a truer discussion of the centrality of ‘otherness’ to an understanding of interconnectedness in an increasingly interdependent world. Although my work is based in my identities as a disabled, gay, Jewish man, what I write about are universal issues. For example, when *Body, Remember* was published I was asked why someone who was not disabled, gay, or Jewish should read my book. My answer: The book is about the relationship between the body and memory. We all have bodies. We all remember.

aspeers: How has your time outside the US shifted your perspective on the place where you studied and grew up?

Fries: My time living abroad (mostly in Japan and Germany) has shown how different cultures look differently, or similarly, at such things as disability, mortality, and ‘otherness.’ I was surprised to find that in Japan similar tropes of blindness pervade their early texts as they do in Western culture. But in Japan, mortality is looked at quite differently than in the West. I was also surprised that disability is prevalent in Japanese creation and other myths, as well as being crucial in the spread of the Japanese language through the roaming blind biwa singers.

My time in Japan taught me that I needed to change some things I assumed about disability for Japanese audiences to understand. For example, in the US, I often talked about what the reaction would be if groups such as African Americans were not given access to buildings. But in Japan, which is a more homogeneous

society than the US, I changed this to how the lack of access affects the elderly because Japan has one of the most elderly populations.

My time in Germany has been spent immersed in research about Aktion T4, the Nazi program that mass-murdered disabled people. It has been rather frightening to witness eugenics resurfacing during the pandemic in triage protocols, and the disvaluing of disabled lives. This has happened all over, which shows that eugenics has never left us but still reflects how disabled people are treated. Of course, eugenics was never only a German movement but was prevalent in the US, Canada, the UK, and all over the world.

aspeers: How does your background in literary studies affect your trajectory as a writer? Have you ever had any contact with American studies as a field?

Fries: I'm very interested in the importance of how disability is represented in culture, and that has affected my writing. Because of this concern, I created the Fries Test, which gives a simple checklist to avoid perpetuating stereotypical and untrue depictions of disabled people and disability.

For the first part of my undergraduate years I was an American studies major, before decamping to English and American literature. So, early in my academic life, I was concerned with what was deemed 'American.'

aspeers: The fifteenth issue of *aspeers* revolves around bodies in multiple ways. What are your associations when you think of specifically 'American bodies'?

Fries: I wonder if there is such a thing as an 'American body.' It seems to relate to the question of what is a 'normal body.' I don't believe there is a 'normal body.' When I've taught classes about disability representation, early on I ask the class what constitutes 'normal.' We make a list of these characteristics. Then, I ask if anyone in the class fits the 'norm.' None do.

Perhaps there is an 'ideal body,' which is more an exclusive aberration for which people are taught to strive. If we look at the idea of an 'American body,' then it is more an ideal than anything actual. This reminds me of the Nazi idea of the 'Aryan body.' But none of the Nazi leaders had such a body. Ultimately, an idea of any specific body, especially a nationalized body, is to control and oppress.

In an American context, I think the myth of reinvention of the self is strong, so the medical model of disability, which roots itself in the body rather than the society as the disabling agent, is omnipresent. The idea of 'cure' and perfecting oneself, which is present all over, is especially noxious in the US.

Similarly, the US is perhaps the culture that ties itself to the idea, or ideal, of rugged individualism, in which the individual is given primacy. This is a dangerous myth. Interdependence is the actual way we best survive.

aspeers: In an article from the *Evergreen Review*, you mention how nondisabled writers still use disability as a metaphor rather than a lived experience. Do you see any changes also in regard to literary or film criticism?

Fries: Unfortunately, not much. There has been some movement forward but then along comes a popular movie or book that sets us back once again. Similarly, nondisabled actors still play, and win awards for playing, disabled characters. This has changed in some individual cases but, overall, not so much.

There is a lack of understanding of disability to the point of it being absent from literary or film criticism. Disability, and disabled lives, are mostly seen as a metaphor. Historians also disregard disability. That's where disability studies, hopefully, can make an impact. However, until there are 'mainstream' critics who identify as disabled, not much will change. And for that to happen, other gatekeepers, such as publishers, editors, funders, etc., need to have disabled people with power paid, present, and involved.

aspeers: You recently launched the first episode of season 3 of *Life (Un)Worthy of Life: A Queer Dis/Crip Talk Show*, where your cohost introduced the recent developments in our society, specifically also related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the 'shadow of eugenics.' In the episode you talk about the floor of eugenics, partly also echoing what had developed earlier and eventually led to Aktion T4. Could you elaborate a little bit more on what is meant by the shadow of eugenics?

Fries: Multidisciplinary artist Perel and I are concerned with how eugenics has reared up during the pandemic. Not that it ever went away, as I said earlier. In 2016, in Sagami-hara, Japan, nineteen disabled people were killed, and twenty-six injured, in a care home for the disabled. The murderer was someone who had worked at the institution. In 2021, in Potsdam, outside of Berlin, four disabled people were killed in an institution. The murderer was someone who worked at the institution. Both perpetrators claimed that killing disabled people was good, both for society and the individuals themselves. These are just two examples of the shadow of eugenics.

There is a stream of philosophy and bioethics called practical ethics, which, despite pronouncing otherwise, devalues, and misunderstands, disabled lives. The most noted 'philosopher' of this school is Peter Singer, who holds an endowed professorship in bioethics at Princeton. If one looks at the triage protocols for rationing care during the pandemic, one can easily see how eugenics is alive and well under other names.

So, perhaps shadow of eugenics is too mild. When we talked about this in *Life (Un)Worthy of Life*, I think we meant shadow as meaning 'coming after.' But if eugenics never actually disappeared, has always been present, then perhaps the guillotine of eugenics might be a more accurate description.

During the pandemic, the connection between capitalism and eugenics has also become more obvious. But that's a whole other long discussion.

aspeers: Your poem "Disability Can Save Your Life" narrates stories of where disabilities were the reason something went differently, decisions were made differently, which in these cases eventually led to a lifesaving situation. What were your inspirations for that?

Fries: In *The History of My Shoes and the Evolution of Darwin's Theory*, I write about climbing the Beehive in Acadia National Park with my then-boyfriend Ian. On that climb, because of my individually molded orthopedic shoes, I am able to navigate the climb more efficiently, and safely, than Ian, who does not have a physical disability. That is perhaps the best example I can give.

What has come down from Darwin is the phrase 'survival of the fittest.' But that term was not coined by Darwin, and he didn't use it until the third edition of *On the Origin of Species*. And what is left out, forgotten, is what he actually wrote. The complete thought is the survival of the fittest in a specific situation/context. Climbing the Beehive, I was more 'fit' than Ian.

In "Disability Can Save Your Life," I use an excerpt from *In the Province of the Gods*. What I use is a 9/11 story in which someone who was injured was saved because they moved slower than usual, thus avoiding a collapsing stairway.

I end the piece, which is an audio text with written text provided for accessibility, with an example of interdependence, which disabled people understand more viscerally than the nondisabled. Interdependence has been crucial during the pandemic.

aspeers: Looking ahead, according to your website, you are currently co-curating an exhibition on queer/disability history and culture at the Schwules Museum Berlin in 2022. Could you give us a quick preview of what we can expect?

Fries: This exhibit is a big deal. We are hoping to open the show in August 2022, which depends on securing funding and on how the pandemic affects scheduling. The exhibit is called "Queering the Crip, Crippling the Queer" (there is an article by Professor Carrie Sandahl, Director of the Program on Disability Art, Culture and Humanities, Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago, with this title) and looks at queer disability history, as well as art that relates to, informs, and counteracts this history. There will also be a part of the exhibit that deals with queer/disability activism. The parallels of queer and disability history will be highlighted, and I see the art as bringing these often parallel histories together.

aspeers: Are there any further upcoming events or projects that you want to share with us?

Fries: I'm still working on the book about Aktion T4, *Stumbling over History: Disability and the Holocaust*. Excerpts from the book have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Believer*, and *Craft*, as well as form the basis for my video series *What Happened Here in the Summer of 1940?*

I'm also currently working on multiple projects funded by a three-year multi-project grant from the Canada Council for the Arts. My collaboration with Perel, the episode of *Life (Un)Worthy of Life*, was one of these projects, as will be the exhibit at the Schwules Museum. The second of what will be three cohorts of "Disability Futures in the Arts," a series of essays by disabled artists and writers looking at their own work or work they look to, was recently published at *Wordgathering* (wordgathering.com/vols/issue4/disability-futures/).

I have various speaking engagements this winter and spring, and upcoming projects, pandemic allowing, include filming with Alison O'Daniel in Japan, at the gardens I wrote about in my poem sequence *In the Gardens of Japan*, and in 2023 the world premiere of a song cycle of the poems set by Japanese composer Kumiko Takahashi and sung by Japanese vocalist Mika Kimula. I'm also working on *Frida Kahlo's Leg: Essays on Disability, Role Models, and Representation*. The best way of keeping up with upcoming events and projects is checking my website kennyfries.com.

aspeers: Thank you very much for taking the time to answer our questions.