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Dialogues on Disability: Shelley Tremain Interviews Ladelle McWhorter

Posted on the Dialogues on Disability Blog at:

http://philosophycommons.typepad.com/disability_and_disadvanta/

Hello, I'm Shelley Tremain and I'd like to welcome you to the twenty-ninth installment of Dialogues on Disability, the series of interviews that I am conducting with disabled philosophers and post here on the third Wednesday of each month. The series is designed to provide a public venue for discussion with disabled philosophers about a range of topics, including their philosophical work on disability; the place of philosophy of disability vis-à-vis the discipline and profession; their experiences of institutional discrimination and personal prejudice in philosophy, in particular, and in academia, more generally; resistance to ableism; accessibility; and anti-oppressive pedagogy.

My guest today is Ladelle McWhorter, who is the Stephanie Bennett Smith Chair in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, as well as Professor of Environmental Studies and Philosophy at the University of Richmond. Ladelle is also the author of [Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization](#), [Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy](#), and more than three dozen articles on Foucault, Bataille, Irigaray, and race theory. With Gail Stenstad, she edited [Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy](#). Ladelle, who is an avid gardener, lives with her spouse, four cats, two horses, and a mule just outside Richmond, Virginia.

Welcome to Dialogues on Disability, Ladelle! You grew up in a working-class family in Appalachia. Your family ran small businesses out of your home. You and your siblings were first-generation college students. Please tell us about your upbringing and how it led you to philosophy.

I actually grew up in the Tennessee Valley, southwest of the Appalachian foothills, in North Alabama. My parents both had rural childhoods, and my mother grew up in poverty. But after serving in WWII, my father was able to get a factory job. As a result, my siblings and I grew up in what was, at the time, a small industrial town. Everyone that we knew was blue collar, except for a few engineers in the factories and a handful of service professionals. By middle-class standards, it was an austere life, and, looking back, I realize that our healthcare was quite substandard; but, we never worried about having enough food or shelter.

Apart from the very rural beginnings—and the ongoing attachment to relatives still on farms—our family narrative was typical for white people in the US in the mid-twentieth century. My parents were able to buy a house as one of the benefits of the GI Bill. They worked hard to build equity and looked forward to sending their children to college. The four of us kept our grades up and applied for scholarships and Pell Grants and scraped together the resources for college educations. All of us graduated; three of us took advanced degrees.

For those reasons, I wouldn't say that we were poor. We experienced nothing like the degree of uncertainty, stress, and governmental abandonment that low-income working Americans routinely face today. I was born long enough ago that political leaders still considered providing for citizens' well-being and development an obligation of the state.

How did such a commonplace childhood lead to such an uncommon profession? There are three aspects to my answer, insofar as I have one: religion, race, and sexuality. My parents, especially my mother, were devout Christians. This was before the evangelical movement of the 1970s and the Moral Majority of the 1980s. The Christianity that they practiced was focused on personal morality, spiritual growth, and charity in the broad biblical sense of love and concern for others. It was the Christianity of people such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Hence, even though my parents were white, when King spoke, they listened. He spoke their language and exemplified their values, and that meant that they were pulled by their own moral principles into the racial politics of the day.

And, so were their children. The Civil Rights Movement unfolded right in front of us, all around us, and a neutral stance was impossible. The adults and older children in my family were faced with the choice of either supporting the Civil Rights Movement or abandoning their religious and moral convictions. Their support of it resulted in harassment of the whole family and threats of violence against us, including us younger children. The events that we witnessed in Charlottesville, Virginia last weekend, when the alt-right and neo-Nazis descended on the city with guns, clubs, and torches, killing one counter-protester, were not so different from what we lived through in Alabama in the 1960s.

When people get nostalgic for the old days, the days when America was great and people all got along, before drugs and school shootings and terrorist attacks, I wonder what old days they think that they lived through. My childhood experiences taught me very early about networks of power and resistance and about the ways that power and knowledge intertwine, as well as about the ubiquity of violence both overt and covert. I learned how to stand my ground and how to keep my mouth shut. It is amazing to me how many people are unable to do either.

The latter skill served me well as I began to realize, in the early 1970s, that I was queer. With a decade of observations about the workings of power already behind me, I knew what I was up against if I crossed any well-defined lines—be they color or gender. From 1972 to 1978, as I grew from newly pubescent to adult, I studied the options for constructing a livable life. At first, with the limited comprehension of futurity and the imagination of a youngster, I carried on, protecting my immediate interests with silence or subterfuge and wondering now and then about why I had to. Eventually, as adult realism took over, I saw no hope for anything. A person like me could not live anywhere in the world as I knew it.

That, as you know, precipitated my institutionalization for suicidal depression—about eleven weeks in a psychiatric hospital—followed by immediate departure from my hometown. The only place that I could go to was college: I had won a scholarship the year before. So, I went.

I needed, desperately, to understand the world, not just to know things, but to know the interconnections of things and the why of things. Religion had taught me the importance of such questioning, but the answers it provided had failed me. What does all this mean? What kind of life should I live and how?

I had seen a racist regime collapse in my childhood. Not to say that racism abated; I just mean that the open conspiracy of white supremacy in public office was broken up through federal governmental intervention. In the process, a lot of people's worlds collapsed. I had watched and, for the most part, had been glad. But, then, my own personal world collapsed and I was at a loss. Where do you go when you see no place to go? I was in college, so I went to the Philosophy Department. And I just kept staying there, maybe for lack of imagination.

[Description of image below: Ladelle, a white queer woman with short hair, is sitting in the sunshine on a wooden deck, looking directly at us and smiling broadly. The right-side of Ladelle's head and face are lit up with the sun. In front of Ladelle, a glass filled with a drink and ice cubes rests on a metal patio-table. The wooden railing of the deck and fir trees in the yard beyond the deck fill the background of the image.]



Although you are regarded as a specialist in Continental philosophy, your senior thesis concentrated on Wittgenstein. How did you transition from work on Wittgenstein to work in Continental philosophy?

I still love Wittgenstein. I entered college asking, “What does it all mean?” Wittgenstein asked instead, “Well, how can anything *mean*, and what do we even mean by ‘mean’?” How could a strange little person like me fail to be attracted to a strange set of writings like that?

I was not exposed to Continental philosophy as an undergraduate. The closest that I got to it was a course in twentieth-century philosophy in which Sartre figured, alongside A.J. Ayer, and a seminar in Hannah Arendt whose Kantian approach struck me as contrived. My favorite course was philosophy of science, in which we read Kuhn and Gödel and Feyerabend, and I found that I could laugh at rationality. Wittgenstein was a natural next step. And the next semester, in graduate school, I encountered Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault.

It was an understandable progression. I never crossed any sort of divide. At that time, I didn’t know a divide existed. The Vanderbilt Department was pluralist then, so I continued to read analytic philosophy alongside Continental. There are aspects of both that I never found useful, as well as aspects of both that I still treasure and employ.

You now specialize in Foucault, which is how we first met. You may remember, Ladelle, that I introduced myself to you before your session at a SPEP conference back in 2000 and told you how much I loved your book Bodies & Pleasures. After the session, we talked about feminist treatments of Foucault and the potential that I believed—and still believe—Foucault holds for philosophical analyses of disability. What are your thoughts on the usefulness of Foucault for feminist analysis? Do you have any thoughts on how philosophers of disability should use Foucault?

I think the ways that you use Foucault in your work in feminist philosophy of disability are fascinating and important. I can’t think of anything better!

As you know, the hallmark of Foucault’s work is that he refuses to assume that there is an unchanging given. Whatever presents itself as such—whatever exercises power on the basis of its supposed naturalness or logical necessity or inevitable teleology—arouses Foucaultian skepticism and suspicion. Foucault never said that there are no logical necessities, that nothing is natural, that inevitability and teleology are illusions; he never

made generalizations like that. Instead, he investigated. His investigations offer plausible accounts of the historical origins for concepts, practices, and institutions. The consequence of these investigations is that the concepts, practices, and institutions lose power over us—not completely, perhaps, but to the extent that their power depended on them remaining unquestioned. The weakening of these concepts, practices, and institutions can allow us to exercise our imaginations, to consider alternatives, and to create new possibilities. I experience this destabilization of entrenched ways of thinking and behaving as freeing.

I wrote my dissertation on Foucault and feminism. My main argument was concerned with both the ways in which Foucault's understanding of subjectivity paralleled some feminist critique of atomistic individualism and the ways that, I believed, genealogical accounts of selfhood were more useful for feminists than most feminists had recognized. I still think that's true, although feminist thinking has evolved tremendously and has made great gains since 1986!

I think anyone who is oppressed by configurations of power that are largely enforced through prevailing knowledge—be it knowledge of what is healthy, of what is gender-appropriate, of what is sexually normal, or any number of other things—can find Foucault's genealogical practice and procedures very valuable, even if they don't find his particular investigations to be pertinent to their concerns. Your work shows how standards of health and normality in relation to disability, as well as the very concept of disability itself, can oppress disabled people—as well as people not currently disabled. My work in [*Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*](#) does a little of that too, and it does a lot of work to show how race and sexuality oppress people. To the extent that we can weaken the power of concepts of health, normality, ability, disability, sexuality, and race over our lives, we can lessen that oppression and create conditions under which non-oppressive relations might come into being.

Although my current work is not centered on race, racial oppression and disability are part of it insofar as it focuses on living bodies. I continue to think about bodies in relation to other bodies, bodily systems, interdependencies—what Nancy Tuana calls porosities. One aspect of my current book project concerns interactions—or, what Karen Barad calls “intra-actions”—of bodies. Some of the literature that I'll be reading is the feminist and disability studies work on vulnerability. I suppose this work resonates with me more and more due to recent issues with my back and the fact that I'm hard of hearing. In the first case, I required surgery; and, in the second case, I have started to wear hearing aids.

As its title suggests, and as you have now indicated, [Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy](#), comprises an expansive genealogy of racism and sexual oppression. For your next book, you aim to construct a genealogy of personhood. Please describe this exciting research and the book more generally.

The book that I am currently working on will have two parts. I'm finishing Part One right now. Part One is the genealogical part of the book, which focuses on the concept of personhood, moral and legal. Part Two—which I am really excited about, partly because I have no idea what I'll discover and say—will be ethical rather than genealogical. In other words, the second half of the book will explore ways of living and self-shaping beyond the constraints of personhood. I expect it to delve into feminist new materialisms, environmental philosophy, philosophy of disability, and the feminist literature on vulnerability, as well as who knows what else. I never plan my books before I write; I am led by the research and thinking from section to section. It's a risky way to proceed, and it is time-consuming; my books typically take about a decade to produce. But I cannot imagine a more rewarding—or more philosophically honest—way for me to write.

As I said, I am almost finished with the genealogy of personhood. I'm working right now on some material from the nineteenth century on the development of the concept of individual, or personal, sovereignty. Once that section is done, I will try to figure out how the concept of autonomy got attached to personhood. It simply was not part of the concept through the eighteenth century, and I suspect not really until fairly late in the twentieth century—if you disregard Kant—which I'm not sure I can do. Anyway, the idea of autonomy is now closely bound up with personhood. Tracing the process by which that occurred will likely take me into the penumbra of philosophy of disability and bioethics, because I think a major factor in the process was the imposition of the requirements for clinical consent. It's also a big word in genetic counseling, and I know that started as early as the 1950s. But we'll see. If any of your readers have clues about the earliest connections between personhood and autonomy, I'd love to hear from them!

That's all future work. I guess I should say something about what I've done already over the last four years. It's pretty bizarre stuff because, of course, "personhood" is a very old concept, going back to Roman law. And *persona* goes back to Roman theatre, where it was a translation of a Greek word that might have been a translation of an Etruscan word. The Etruscans had theatrical masks, I think, but they also placed tremendous importance on

death masks. Faces were very important to them. They put images of dead people on their urns in burial vaults. You can see how far afield one can stray in this genealogical work. At any rate, ancient persons were not people. How they got to be people is the subject of the first chapters.

In addition to looking at Roman law and following its influence into the Middle Ages, canon law, and then social contract theory, I also looked at the development of the Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian theology—God in Three Persons. I argue that John Locke brought the legal and the theological genealogical strands together to produce the modern moral person in 1694. Then, that concept, with modifications, makes its way to North America and the development of political and legal theory during the American Revolution. It's been a fascinating study. In the process, I've learned a lot about corporate personhood too, which has been a big issue in the US ever since the Occupy movement. I have an article on that topic coming out this fall in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*.

I would like to have Part One of the manuscript totally wrapped up by May of 2018. It's difficult for me to write a lot during the academic year because of my undergraduate teaching load and university committee responsibilities—such is life in a small, exclusive liberal arts university where lots of student contact time is fundamental to the *ethos*. I've been doing reading for Part Two for a couple of years, as time permitted, but, as I said, that part is not outlined. I don't know how long it will take to write. So, I don't know when the book will be finished. I would hope by the end of 2019, but it's really unpredictable.

You have migrated to the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department at your university from the Philosophy Department. Do you find the environment in WGSS more welcoming to critical analyses of disability, Continental approaches, and other work that continues to be marginalized in philosophy departments?

Yes. Period. But I suppose you want me to elaborate.

I was very reluctant to leave philosophy and, of course, professionally, I am still very much *in it*. I have a lifetime membership in the APA. I attend and keep up membership in SPEP, the International Association for Environmental Philosophy, the Foucault Circle, and *philoSOPHIA*. I love philosophy.

Besides that, I directed the PIKSI program at Penn State for three years. The purpose of the PIKSI program is to encourage members of underrepresented groups to attend graduate school and pursue a career in philosophy. The idea is to diversify philosophy faculty and the profession, and it has had some success. My leaving the discipline, even just at the university as opposed to the professional level, felt a little like a betrayal of that commitment. So, I thought about a position in gender studies for three years before I actually got serious and went for it.

What finally pushed me had more to do with the department at my university than with the profession. Over the years, I had become marginalized. When I was hired there, it was a pluralist department that wanted to feature feminist philosophy, but after twenty-three years it had become analytic and feminist thought was seen as “applied philosophy.” I was teaching only service courses, nothing in the major, and I no longer even knew the students who were majoring in philosophy. There were tensions between me and some of my colleagues based on disagreements about departmental direction. I knew that they would be happier without me; and so, I left.

In my new job, there are drawbacks. Within the university, as a whole, philosophy is far more respected than gender studies, and hence it is better funded. WGSS must fight for every penny. I hold the only line in WGSS; so, I AM the “department.” I share an administrative assistant with the Geography Department, Environmental Studies, and American Studies. She is two buildings away—so I do a lot of my own clerical work.

But I do feel free, in a way that I have only appreciated gradually. In my classes, I can teach anything. If I want to use a history text or a sociology text or have students make art instead of write essays, I can do that. I’m free to pursue problems rather than teach traditions. Obviously, given my genealogical researches, I have always found it difficult to keep within the canon. I read all kinds of bizarre things. Now I can admit it! And I can even have students do it too. And, yes, oh yes, yes, yes, my WGSS colleagues love my scholarship and see the value of it. They don’t dismiss it as “applied” or as “literature” or as “girl stuff,” because they don’t think those things are things rightfully dismissed. And, plus, they see my work as fundamentally and centrally philosophical.

I’m lucky.

I do still worry about philosophy, when I’m not making fun of it at a newfound distance, because I think most departments have lost touch with the world about which students care and in which they will be living and leading. Being

able to describe and appreciate the Gettier Problem isn't going to equip young people to face our future—climate change, mass immigration, economic collapse, etc. Not that any intellectual discipline can really do that, but it seems to me that philosophy actually might be of more value to this generation of students than, say, finance will be. We can't prepare them to solve technical and social problems that we can barely imagine, but we can prepare them to reflect, analyze, and care effectively about justice. Not that philosophy departments shouldn't teach analytic epistemology—I have appreciation for that branch of philosophy myself and find it sometimes useful—but if departments are not willing to focus primarily on real-world social, ethical, legal, and economic forces and configurations of power, they do the few students that they can attract a great disservice.

Foucault's work, critical race theory, feminist theory, philosophy of disability, and environmental philosophy are so important; yet, they are so marginal in most philosophy curricula. It is disheartening and, well, ridiculous.

If philosophy departments won't do those things, we need to create departments where those things are central. WGSS can be one such place. We can act on what we know and experiment to learn what we don't know. Even without university-wide respect and comparable resources, I feel hopeful. I love my job!

That's an enthusiastic note to end our interview on! What articles, books, or other resources do you want to recommend on the topics that we have discussed in this interview?

Well, my books and your books are very good! So, I'm really looking forward to the imminent publication of your book, *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability*.

Apart from that, I'm very hot right now on a book that came out last year by a political scientist named Samantha Frost. I don't know her or anything about her, but I love this book that she wrote called [*Biocultural Creatures*](#). She took the trouble to take a lot of science courses and then write chapters for humanists on physics, chemistry, biology, and genetics so that she could explain and argue for a way of understanding ourselves as simultaneously biological and cultural. It's a great book. My favorite chapter is the one called "Membranes." I think if we all thought in terms of membranes rather than boundaries, we might rethink human being entirely. You can see, maybe,

how this connects with Part Two of my book, which is where I try to think myself beyond personhood.

A few months back, I read Debra Bergoffen's book, [*Contesting the Politics of Genocidal Rape*](#), which is a very important book that has not gotten enough attention. Debra is a very careful scholar, who has really done her work in tracing out the international legal and policy issues, the historical issues, and of course the philosophical issues. And her writing is exceptionally compelling. It is really a gripping book and very well grounded. It isn't directly related to my current work, except that it examines concepts of vulnerability. And, as I mentioned, I know I will be delving into feminist writing on vulnerability as I work on Part Two. For anyone who cares about sexual violence, international human rights, and shifting concepts of vulnerability, this book is a must-read.

I doubt that your readers and listeners would want to engage with a lot of the material that I've been reading for Part One of my book—mostly really odd old pamphlets, work by US and British historians, law review articles, and some philosophy of natural rights. That will all be much more interesting to most readers and listeners when it is put together in my book than in its myriad tiny parts in all those other texts.

What I can do is list some of the other books that I look forward to reading ASAP. I'm not guaranteeing that these books are good, just that they appeal to me right now.

I'm excited about reading Joy James's 2013 book, [*Seeking the Beloved Community*](#). As you know, Joy James will be the keynote speaker at the [upcoming philoSOPHIA conference](#) that I am hosting in Richmond next March. Her work is in critical race theory and history and, more recently, in prison studies. The book is subtitled, *A Feminist Race Reader*, and is a collection of essays on all these topics.

In the next couple of weeks, I'm going to read Chad Lavin's little book [*The Politics of Responsibility*](#). For several years, I've been looking for texts that challenge the idea that responsibility accrues only to individuals. Iris Young's posthumous book, [*Responsibility for Justice*](#), is very good on that topic. Lavin's book looks like a critique of liberal responsibility with a foray into an alternative conception—which is something we really need!

Out of curiosity, I'm also going to read the essays in a 2014 anthology from Oxford called [*From Individual to Collective Intentionality*](#). For the same reasons, I want to see how people try to make sense of non-individualistic

thinking and action. This quest has been part of what informed my study of corporate personhood, by the way. The legal literature on that topic throughout the twentieth century, especially on corporate *mens rea*, is really interesting.

Three books that just look interesting and may be fun, as well as related to my project of rethinking selfhood beyond the person are: [*The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*](#), by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing; [*Lab Girl*](#), by Hope Jahren; and [*A Body, Undone: Living On After Great Pain*](#), by Christina Crosby. I hope that all of these books will stimulate my thinking about bodies, selves, responsibility, and collective existence as I look forward to working on Part Two of the manuscript. I can't vouch for these books, having not yet read them, only share my enthusiasm and anticipation.

Ladelle, thank you so much for this very diverse collection of recommendations and for your considered and thought-provoking insights throughout this interview. It's been a real pleasure to interview you.

Readers/listeners are invited to use the Comments section below to respond to Ladelle McWhorter's remarks, ask questions, and so on. Comments will be moderated. As always, although signed comments are encouraged and preferred, anonymous comments may be permitted.

Please join me here again on Wednesday, September 20th at 8 a.m. EST, for the thirtieth installment of the Dialogues on Disability series and, indeed, on every third Wednesday of the months ahead. I have a fabulous line-up of interviews planned. If you would like to nominate someone to be interviewed (self-nominations are welcomed), please feel free to write me at s.tremain@yahoo.ca. I prioritize diversity with respect to disability, class, race, gender, institutional status, nationality, culture, age, and sexuality in my selection of interviewees and my scheduling of interviews.