



# Jim Ferris's Poetry: Space and Embodied Experience of Disabilities

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## Abstract

Crip poetry is one of the major areas of disability writing, and Jim Ferris as a disability writer, challenges established ideas about embodiment, space and community through a focus on his own personal experiences. Poetry creates meaning in space through spatial imaginaries. Ferris's poetry deals with embodied subjectivity from the perspective of spatiality. Through his poems, Ferris explores the experiences of people with disability, disability as a medical process of defining bodies, and the social perception of disability. He is of the opinion that space and identity are vital to everyone's lives, and it is not others who determine the role of disabled persons. Instead, disability is an individual experience, and basically disabled persons are human beings with emotions. Ferris uses poetry as a powerful medium to express his disability experience. He strongly negates the assertion that people with disability are decentered subjects.

**Keywords:** Crip poetry, space, spatial imaginary, identity, decentered subject.

## Introduction

In literature, writers make creative use of space to convey and construe meanings. Spatial perception is basically visual (Tversky 2006: 2–3). Studies in spatial cognition have revealed that space is cognitively perceived by referring to objects and their scene properties (e.g., size, shape, and scale) and by referring to relations among objects (e.g., distance, orientation, and location-Waller and Nadel 2013:3). The 'imaginative mind' (Roth 2007), is a new enterprise in cognitive poetics. The formal structure of literature is spatial in terms of its physical existence and in terms of our psychological perception (Mitchell 1980). A poem, as a material artefact, is a spatial object.

Poetry creates meaning in space. According to Larsen (1996) and Brandt(1995), human representations manifest distinct but connected versions of an *imaginary space*, which unfolds in three basic phenomenological forms of spatial imaginaries: a bio-imaginary, a socio-imaginary, and a phantasmatic-imaginary. The general existential and metaphysical meaning of events and states is shown to be linked to the evaluative morphologies of spaces and versions of subjective embodiment. Embodied spatiality represents a kind of reality. The embodied perception when combined with intellectual conception offers a remarkable alternate reading on the representation and function of space as experienced and imagined. The human imaginary has a structure of its own, which determines basic features of what makes experiences meaningful. The experienced space has emotional meaning for the subject. Recall of proximal(near) or distal(far) experiences can be euphoric or dysphoric. The poetic imagery present in a text makes it possible to decode and interpret spatial descriptions and thus help elucidate the unfolding of meaning production in the poetic text.

In poetry, imagination is associated with ‘landscape’ and ‘sound scape’. The elements that activate experience are expressed by the poet through metaphorical imageries to convey emotion, mood and feelings. We often ‘think’ in terms of objects, and ‘feel’ in terms of elements, which are ever present in our sensory perception of things, although there is an experiential difference as far their physicality are concerned. An element is proximal if it is associated with tactile, olfactory or gustative senses and distal if it is heard or seen. Spatial imagery foregrounds objects and background elements. However, there are distinct versions of these groundings in the human imagination. Presence and proximity of a person in an intimate space can become euphoric whereas absence and distance leading to loneliness can cause dysphoria. While bio-imaginary speaks of loneliness, solitude versus togetherness, company or the disjunction or conjunction of subject and object, as per Greimas terminology, socio-imaginary is about euphoric valorization of a hero against dysphoric masses. Social space or socio-imaginary is as important to humans as the intimate bodily space or bio-imaginary because the Subject experience it as an ‘liberation’ or freedom from intimacy. The ‘post-social’ space which is a wider, more abstract, fantastic, dream-like is the phantasmatic imaginary. Here, the context of the Subject encompasses the whole universe and identities are multifarious. Individual solitude that verges almost on an existential sphere in the bio-imaginary space transcends to a metaphysical state where the distal and proximal experiences merge in a sacred fusion. In this state of psychosis, the subject will experience the intimacy of the universe. In poetry, as in art, we find varied expressions of the imaginary processes.

Poetry can open up complex spaces of embodiment in creative new ways and at the same time reshape our understandings of non-normative embodiment through figurative and structural representations of “bodily contours” and the real and imaginary spaces they inhabit by stimulating our thoughts regarding stigmatization in the public arena. In *Ideas on Space* Ian Davidson postulates that poetry is a particularly powerful vehicle for experimenting with the relationship and integration of ideas of space and embodiment, disability theory, and the poetic “processes of production and reception”. (48). In fact, poetry gives creative space in which to challenge the “repressed” representational treatment of people with disabilities so that their function in literary discourse is seen to extend beyond the two functions summed up by Mitchell and Snyder as a “stock feature of characterization” and as an “opportunistic metaphorical device” (Narrative Prosthesis 47).

Disability poetry or crip poetry explore the tension between the poet’s desire to represent personal experiences of disability and the urge to utilize the art form to make a wider set of political arguments that challenge how individuals are encouraged to view their embodiment by society.(Fletcher 15) In *Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability* (2011), Jennifer Barlett and Shiela Black talk about how stereotypical cultural notions tend to keep visible disability experiences invisible. The stress how disability poets like Jim Ferris aim at employing self-definition through impairment(17).

Jim Ferris, a performance artist, Disability Studies scholar and one of the most widely known American disability poet who refers to himself “Poet of cripples”. His major poems consist of “Poems with Disabilities”, “Poet of Cripples”, “Normal”, and “Facts of Life”. Ferris firmly believes that poetry has the capacity to effect cultural change. Ferris’s poetry deals with embodied subjectivity from the perspective of spatiality. He conceives his poetry in spatial terms as a meeting point for political and personal agency. In *Literary Theory: A very Short Introduction*, Jonathan Culler states that “Literature has always been concerned with questions about identity...”(112).Through his award-winning *Hospital Poems* (2004), Ferris tries to articulate the significance of space and identity in the lives of people with disabilities.

The identity or the function of self is closely linked to the term space, and there are two relevant questions raised in connection with the concept of identity. These questions are related to the self and society as to whether the self is something given or made and, should it be conceived in individual or in social terms. Tom Fletcher employs a new literary spatial concept of “crip contours” which is an original way of seeing space from a crip or disabled perspective. The term is expressive of the spatial outlines contained in the form of outer and inner corporeal surfaces and the meeting points where bodies intersect with objects, others and their situated practices. A crip perspective can be understood as an alternative way of perceiving the spaces of the body as a form of “crip contour” which are re-imagined and reconfigured by contact with disability. Ferris expresses the spatial nature of crip poetry by declaring that it has “the potential to transform the world...” (“Crip Poetry”).

Space is basic dimension of existence which manifests in every aspect of physical, psychological and social life of every human being. All representations have a necessary spatial dimension and all representations of space need a medium. In Foucauldian terms, space “draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space” (“Of Other Spaces” 25).For Ferris, this erosion of self is represented in

diverse ways. Poetry provides a flexible medium through which such complex spatial perspectives can be articulated. Ferris comments on the capacity of disability poetry to disrupt from “inside” the lived spaces by validating marginalised experience of otherness. He observes: “Poetry seeks to explore and validate the lived experience of moving through the world with a disability” (Encyclopedia of Disability 151).

Reading from a disability perspective opens up our thinking on embodiment and how bodies negotiate the world. Ferris uses his disability as a medium to manifest the presence of disability. He believes that his body is a spatial medium, and as a writer he uses his bodily experiences to write disability poems. Space and spatiality are shaped and re-shaped through the body in pain. Ferris makes use of the institutional spaces of the hospital to challenge established ideas about embodiment, space and community through a focus on his own personal experiences. All throughout *The Hospital Poems*, Ferris runs his readers through spaces are charted: hospitals, with corridors, beds, dark rooms, and wheelchair. An analysis of Jim Ferris’ select poems using the terminology of spatial imaginary as put forward by Larsen and Brandt, reveal how Ferris uses the social space of the hospital to poetically describe his bodily experiences of disability. The selected poems all explore the relationship between space, otherness, language, power, and embodiment.

Ferris, who suffers from a mobility disability, had to spend much of his childhood and adolescence in hospital. He writes of his hospital experience in *The Hospital poems*, and it is written as a memoir in poetry. Kathi Wolfe describes his debut collection as a “sharper instrument of social change than any political revolution” (“The Hospital Poems”). For Ferris, poetry became an embodied experience of the crippled body that would be personal for readers with or without disabilities. The identity of the persons with disabilities is always questioned and challenged by the abled society. The body of abled ones is standardized and normal whereas the body of disabled people is treated as the ‘other’. In the context of social understanding of disability, *The Hospital Poems* invites all kind of readers to share the writer’s experiences of shame and pain. Ferris is bold enough to speak of the ‘space’ of the disability writings through his poem “Poems with Disabilities”:

I’m sorry—this space is reserved  
for poems with disabilities. I know  
its one of the best spaces in the book,  
but the poems with disabilities act  
requires us to make all reasonable  
accommodations for poems that aren’t  
normal. (Davis 537)

Ferris begins the poem by mentioning about the space for disability poems, as normally such poems are not accommodated in a space where the poems of abled ones dominate. Among *The Hospital Poems*, Jim Ferris writes in “Post-Op”:

you are alone. And it hurts. No One  
can share this, and you know it in your marrow  
when you’re wide awake at midnight,  
for the first time since morning, and now you know  
how much it hurts, how badly your bones  
mistreated, how alone you can be  
in a room with fifteen others.

The poems tell the story of an ordinary boy who is under the treatment of doctors and other people who want to fix him to become normal. It also narrates of the affective feelings of being spatially isolated (“in a room with fifteen” and yet “alone”), of the stark loneliness, and pain. The poem reveals the complexities of nearness and distance, pain and comfort. The lived reality of institutional space in hospitals is depicted from a child’s perspective and synthesized by the subjective imagination of the adult narrator, who serves as an outside interpreter.

In the poem “The Coliseum”, marginalization and loss of agency is conveyed through metaphors of architectural spaces which control and oppress the body and the mind. It describes the denial of the disabled. The hospital is compared to coliseum, a place where patronizing doctors and nurses are described as a group of:

professionals, lords of the hospital, cold-eyed  
white coats trained to find your flaws, focus on failings,  
who measure your meat minutely. You are a specimen  
for study, a toy, a puzzle—they speak to each other as if  
you are unconscious  
already, but for commands. (42)

The speaker expresses his anger and shame on being treated as a mere specimen. For the doctors, the boy is a specimen for study, a toy, or a puzzle, and they speak to each other as if he is unconscious. The poem's title "Coliseum," itself perceives the hospital as a public arena and denotes the sense of powerlessness of the patient. It conjures images of patients as slave-like objects acquired for sport and entertainment, like captives displayed in a public amphitheatre at the mercy of the doctors' whims. For Ferris, the hospital is seen as a place of sheer 'humiliation' where the disabled body is publicly shamed. The image of the body perched on display recalls Foucault's observation of how power controls everyone functioning from within the societal panopticon machine. Ferris's allusion to the claustrophobic, impersonal, restrictive prison-like nature of the hospital space recalls Foucault's analysis of Jeremy Bentham's theoretical panopticon where institutional power systems are described as located in observable architectural spaces designed as social control mechanisms (*Discipline and Punish* 200). The narrator in the poem is represented as a passive recipient of external orders and "commands" (HP42 21) which is reminiscent of Foucault's views that the uneven power dynamics become incorporated into the narrator's sense of self and agency as they are a product of a deeply embedded set of power relations (*Power* 73-4). The hospital thus becomes a dichotomy of spatial inclusion and exclusion.

For Ferris, the hospital represents not only a medical institution but is also an embodiment of socially and culturally notions of disability. There is a sense of disconnection and detachment between the self and the institutional hospital space. In the Hospital poems, the interior architectural spaces of confinement are both real and metaphorical spaces of control and disenfranchisement. Ferris illustrates that the "specificity of power" governed through the space of the hospital is indicative of power, authority and rule "applied differently" to disabled individuals (Rutherford 303). Essentially, the sense of dehumanization that Ferris's poems underline shows a rejection of ableist culture that seldom promote inclusion, empathy and solidarity to the disabled individual or their community at large.

In his poem "Poet of Cripples" Ferris writes that he would like to become a poet of cripples. But it does not mean that his poetry is addressed only to the cripples, instead he is the representative of the hollow men and boys groping to be whole, of girls limping toward womanhood and women reaching back, all slipping and falling toward the cavern we carry within, our hidden void. The poem reflects the lives of the crippled who are identified by society as dysfunctional or persons who are not up to the expectation of able society. He therefore speaks for a 'space' of their own:

...a place for each to become full, whole'  
 room of our own, space to grow in ways  
 unimaginable to the straight  
 and the narrow, the small and the similar,  
 the poor, normal ones who do not know  
 their poverty. Look with care, look deep.  
 Know that you are a cripple too.  
 I sing for cripples; I sing for you. (Davis 540)

The poem conceives the idea of an ideal future space in which policies of equality and inclusion evolve from an acceptance of disability embodiment as a collective identity. Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991) speaks of representations of bodies negotiating spaces, coming into contact with other objects and practices, and the spaces of the body, inhabiting and being affected by contact with external forces. He draws attention to the connection between spatial practices and the performances within space that are dominated by ableist notions of space and embodiment. Space is both lived and conceptualized. The repeated direction to "look" invites readers to scrutinize the laws, literature and language in a broader sense (HPix 12).

Every text is the history of the lives and experiences of people, and it has nothing to do with the terms like abled and disabled. Ferris argues that reading is a universal activity in which social perception of pain is more or less same. His words elucidate it:

...the World tilts  
 a little, angle of vision  
 jumbs, your entrails aren't  
 where you left them. You  
 remember your aunt died  
 of cancer at just your age  
 and may be yesterday's twinge means  
 something after all



...the poem  
is right  
where it belongs. (Davis 538)

It is significant to notice that there is an established notion that the subject in every society is formed by some hegemonic power structures. As a result, the possibilities of thought and actions are determined by a series of systems over which the subject has no control. Such hegemonic control also finds reflection in writings as Jonathan Culler states: "Narrative literature especially has followed the fortunes of characters as they define themselves and are defined by various combinations of their past, the choices they make, and the social forces that act upon them" (111). Bodies are variably made visible and invisible through socially scripted lenses where all are not perceived as equal. People are invented by discourses. Foucault describes how discourse works in a complex relationship within the formation of the subject. Since essential subjectivity cannot be established, it leads to negotiation of differences that allows multifarious ways in being politically recognized. Michael Greene in *Situating the Decentered Subject* talks about how Calvin O Schrag posits that the most vociferous feature of the twentieth century is the rejection of the traditional notion of subjectivity superseded by the embodied subject. In an era preoccupied with managing identity and difference, subjectivity put into question becomes a politics of being and becoming. Calls to decenter the human subject dominate much of today's disciplinary agenda with "a move away from a subject-centered approach to experience" (Ash and Simpson 2016, 53). Consequently, in a postmodern world of decentered subjects, agency is made possible by the very material productions of power that must often be resisted. As a relation between bodies, *power*, in the Spinozist terms favored by Foucault and Deleuze, refers to a subject's capacity to *act upon another's actions* (Foucault 1983b: 221).

Crip poetry resists held notions of body as defined by its ability to function according to pre-existing definitions of ability, independence, normativity and appearance. It gives emphasis on embodiment, especially atypical embodiment. Poetic representations of lived and conceived spaces are subverted by disability writers to undermine ableist conceptions of reality and ways of perceiving space. The disability poems of Jim Ferris resist the spatial boundaries of his childhood which are reimagined and reclaimed through the adult speaker's poetic voice. Ferris's poems scrutinize spatial dialectics of "tyranny," crippling values and practices that are a reflection of societal and organisational distributions of power. (Fletcher 65). Literal and metaphorical notions of containment feature in *The Hospital Poems*, also function as metaphorical representations of cultural and institutional spaces that regulate, contain and control. Ferris's narrators are situated in the marginalised and contained spaces of the hospital, its specialist rooms, corridors and beds, wards, windows and waiting rooms. These prison-like spaces represent microcosms of societal values where "rituals of devaluation and degradation that take place ...within our society at large" (Carrie "Resistance and Hope"). Ferris make use of innovative metaphors of space to explore the transition from being a young person to an adult to articulate the physical, psychological, emotional impact of medical, societal and cultural conceptions of disability that intersect and defines his sense of self. Tom Fletcher opines that Ferris invites readers to consider embodiment from a disability perspective by emphasising that knowledge does not come from external appearances. Ferris poems are of opening space so as to open people's mindsets, of reclaiming language and eradicating social and medical stigma attached to disability. As a disability rights poet, Ferris craps societal attitudes and medical practices that expose the narrator to the "gaze" of others (HP18 7), which leaves him emotionally "naked" and "humiliated" (HP18 3-8). The metaphors of hospital spaces through their representation, allow for a form of resistance.

## Conclusion

Poetry by people with disabilities plays a vital role in disability arts and culture. Ferris calls himself a poet of cripples as he feels that his identity is biologically given. He affirms that crip poetry centers on the experience of disabled people, and it carries the potential for a transformation in consciousness. It does not merely transform the consciousness of the poet and the reader. Instead, it has the capability to transform the world, to establish more space in the imagination, and in culture. Though written from a disability rights perspective, Ferris's poetry is breath-takingly honest about the emotional and physical pain in his childhood world. Dealing with these experiences and memories are not easy, but Jim Ferris's *The Hospital Poems* allow connection in anger as well as in healing and open spaces of agency for reclamation of identity.

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