



Inviting movements in physiotherapy: An anthology of critical scholarship

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Inviting Movements in Physiotherapy

AN INTRODUCTION

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“Physiotherapy, as a material practice, ought to be understood as more than a mere economic exchange of services, technical knowledge and skills: it involves working on, with, for, around and through bodies that encounter, interact with and touch each other, move and are moved physically, psychologically, socially, culturally, biopolitically and emotionally.” (Rajala, 2018, p. 58)

Our anthology of critical physiotherapy writing invites thinking that starts from a deceptively simple question: *What happens when we explore movement in physiotherapy?* Our professional identity hinges on promoting movements of certain kinds. The idea of “therapeutic exercise” sits at the core of our profession and we promote ourselves as “movement experts” (Sahrmann, 2020). We consider physical movement of people’s bodies through space, of air into lungs and blood through vessels, among others. Within physiotherapy, as Gibson (2016) highlights, our nuanced vocabularies and practices targeting movement produce multiple physical, social, and existential effects, many of which are unrecognized within the profession.

Movement far exceeds physiotherapy’s framing of it. Physical movements are continuous, and can be choreographed and trained or creative, meandering and exploratory. Some physical movements are valorised, while others framed as deficiency (Gibson, 2014; Gibson, 2016), though these can be

understood otherwise (Breedt & and Barlott, 2025; Gibson et al., 2025; Nicholls & Vieira, 2023). Metaphorically, movements can be social mobilisations within communities to fight for change, while being moved conveys an intense emotional experience. The title of our anthology, *Inviting movements in physiotherapy*, explores this broader sense of movement, thinking with metaphors from both within our profession—hypo and hypermobility, for example—and from other terrains to make sense of the present and explore opportunities for the future.

What does it mean to invite movements? This collection of physiotherapy scholarship, the third anthology of the Critical Physiotherapy Network,¹ continues the tradition of being “a positive force for an otherwise physiotherapy.” Ten years into its existence, critical physiotherapy continues:

1. “Actively exploring the world beyond the current boundaries of physiotherapy practice and thought;
2. Challenging physiotherapy to critically examine its position on alterity and otherness, abnormality, deviance, difference and disability;
3. Recognising and problematising power asymmetries inherent in physiotherapy practice, particularly where they marginalise some groups at the expense of others;
4. Developing a culture and appreciation for the exploration of all views that deviate from conventional thought and practice in physiotherapy;
5. Actively embracing ideas that promote thinking against the grain/challenging in physiotherapy;
6. Being open to a plurality of ideas, practices, objects, systems and structures that challenge contemporary physiotherapy practice and thought;
7. Promoting critically informed thinking, encouraging ideas from diverse disciplines uncommon in mainstream physiotherapy, including anthropology, the arts, cultural studies, critical theory, education, geography, historiography, quantum physics, humanities, linguistics, philosophy, politics, sociology and others; and

8. Providing a space for ideas that promote a more positive, diverse and inclusive future for the profession” (Critical Physiotherapy Network, 2015-2024; Nicholls et al., 2023).

We, the editors, are health professionals, educators, and researchers with therapy backgrounds—three physiotherapists and one occupational therapist. In *Inviting Movements in Physiotherapy*, we assembled a collection that spans critical, post-structuralist, de-colonial, humanist, and post-humanist perspectives. There are tensions here which we do not seek to tame or settle. Instead, this anthology provides a space for a range of interventions on physiotherapy, unsettling taken-for-granted assumptions and practices in different ways. We are critical scholars analysing the present and offering visions for the future rooted in a commitment to openness and a tolerance for uncertainty.

Committing to openness: Embracing the dialogical

Critical physiotherapy is best understood as critical physiotherapies—a multiplicity (Mol, 2003). Thinking with the musical composition sense of movement, our field’s scholarship can stand alone, but also belongs to a larger whole. Critical scholarship resists a singular, authoritative definition (Kincheloe et al., 2018). Instead, critical scholarship is a series of movements, based on the appreciation that:

- All thought is historically and socially situated and shaped by power relations—including what we think of as “facts.”
- Language is not fixed or stable. Its change is often mediated by capitalism as it is practiced via production and consumption.
- Language is core to how we develop a sense of ourselves and our subjectivity.
- Within any society, certain groups are privileged and others oppressed, though the groups in these positions vary across societies. Oppression is most effective when those deemed subordinate “accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable.”
- Oppressions (and privileges) are multiple and often interconnect; focusing only on one can erase connections.
- Mainstream research practices often maintain capitalism and reproduce systems of oppression, including racism, sexism,

poverty, ableism, heteronormativity, among others (Kincheloe et al., 2018, p. 237).

Criticality requires an openness that refuses simplicities or domination. Critical thinkers remain humble in the incompleteness of knowledge and theory and open to the possibility of new directions. Scholars use different terms to describe this. Bakhtin—a Russian scholar who wrote literary criticism as coded social theory and criticism of Stalin—called this openness the *dialogical* (Bakhtin, 1984). Bakhtin’s dialogical exists in contrast to the monological, an authoritative voice which asserts itself as the only valid perspective. The dialogical appreciates that there is no single authority, no final voice to which we defer. Feminist scholar Donna Haraway referred to the authoritative account as a “god-trick,” wherein one claims an all-knowingness, which is an impossible objectivity (Haraway, 1988). A monological, authoritative voice dominates, sometimes to the point of violence to other voices. When authoritative, monological voices dominate, other forms of knowledge suffer in various ways. In physiotherapy, for example, our authoritative normalisation of walking leads to a repression of creative mobilities such as crawling (Gibson, 2016; Gibson & Teachman, 2012). The monological can take much more repressive forms, which feminist postcolonial scholar Gayatri C. Spivak called *epistemic violence*, wherein Western ways of thinking and doing are imposed, suppressing and denigrating local knowledges and traditions as unintelligible (Rosalind, 2010).

Over the past decade, as summarized by Nicholls et al. (2023), critical physiotherapy scholarship has grown into a professional subfield, one that routinely engages phenomenological, critical, post-structuralist, and post-humanist theories among others. The roots of critical physiotherapy, they suggest, start in resistance to physiotherapy’s unquestioned alignment with Western biomedicine, including unsettling the core theorisations of bodies as machines (further described by Nicholls & Gibson, 2010; Nicholls & Vieira, 2023), and of “normality” as an ideal (see also Breedt & Barlott, 2025; Gibson, 2016). Critical physiotherapy is in a continual process of becoming, expanding, including beyond those terrains reviewed by Nicholls and colleagues (2023). Several contributions assembled here strengthen a new direction in critical physiotherapy: a growing critique of colonialism as it is enacted through physiotherapy education and practice (Lurch et al., 2023; Mtima-Jere et al., 2024).

We invite readers to explore this book with a dialogical commitment to think anew about how to liberate physiotherapy from dominating, monological approaches to practice and scholarship. A deeper understanding is possible by learning from a range of examples and perspectives; variation helps us better attune to the range of possibilities in the situations we find ourselves in (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The move to pluriversality: Tolerating uncertainty

In this anthology of critical physiotherapy scholarship, we invite movement away from the idea of *universality*, embracing instead pluriversality (González García, 2006). Pluriversality is an epistemic and political delinking from modernity/coloniality, wherein beliefs based on Western scientific knowledge are framed as the universal. Pluriversality brings into existence other ethics and politics by foregrounding “other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 5). Diverse feminist (Mama, 2020) and Indigenous (Ndlovu, 2014) epistemologies amongst other knowledge systems are centred, thus situating Western, eurocentric knowledge as one way of knowing amongst others. The goal is not to replace one authoritative account with another, with all the problems that follow. On the contrary, criticality and pluriversality invite new ways of thinking as we wrestle and delink from knowledge production entangled with the colonial matrix of power.

The regulatory devices that maintain the colonial matrix of power are largely epistemic, but also economic and ontological (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Similar to Haraway’s “god-trick,” Mignolo and Walsh (2018, p. 139) elaborate that the “Western Christian version of humanity, complemented by secular de-Goding narratives of science, economic progress, political democracy, and lately globalisation” created a field of representation, a set of rhetorics and global designs that maintains the colonial matrix of power. They argue this field of representation rests on three pillars, namely race, sex, and nature that operate as the “axes” around which domination was organised and legitimated during colonisation (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 153). To this, we echo critical disability scholars who argue ableism and its manifestations are also central to coloniality (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2020). Arising from these axes are uncontested colonial hierarchies of domination that keep humans at different levels of subordination. This matrix of power,

with its logic rooted in colonialism, conceals itself from the spatio-temporal determinants from which knowledge is created. It obscures that these determinants include conceptualisations of time, space, histories, amongst others, that were themselves re-constituted to serve the colonial matrix of power. While obscuring the ingrained and enduring presence of coloniality, knowledge produced purports to be universal. Pluriversality questions the position of universally accepted professional knowledge, including that upon which physiotherapy relies, that emerged during modernity/coloniality as singular truth.

Embracing and building a tolerance for uncertainty steps into the discomfort of unlearning the taken-for-granted acceptance of universal knowledge in and of physiotherapy. It involves an openness towards what de Sousa Santos refers to as “ecologies of knowledges” that come to constitute pluriversality (de Sousa Santos, 2007). Doing this involves reflecting on aspects of knowledge production we may overlook, asking ourselves: “when, why, how and what for did the concepts come into being?” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 171). The chapters that follow invite us to pursue avenues for engaging with pluriversality as physiotherapy moves to knowing and being otherwise.

Introduction to the Chapters

In a dialogical spirit and a pluriversal commitment, we deliberately do not take up the God-like position to offer “solutions” in any stabilised sense. Indeed, across the book, authors take issue with the assumptions that physiotherapists’ roles are to “fix problems.” What we offer are different possibilities for physiotherapy otherwise, as authors grapple with the present and imagined futures. Each chapter can stand alone, though many different connections can be made across them. We chose the following sections: Being moved by experience and voice; Relinquishing stability and risking movement; Rupturing movements and radical imaginations.

The contributions in Part 1, *Being moved by experience and voice*, address a muted perspective in physiotherapy: first-person narrative accounts of experiencing physiotherapy as therapists and as persons engaging in physical therapies. But it is far more than just therapist and/or patient identities that shape these narrative explorations of physiotherapy, as the variety of chapters highlight.

How to begin to take migration seriously in the profession of physiotherapy? Jeffrey Andrion's *"I didn't come to work in a coffee shop": The untold stories of transnational physiotherapists in Canada* builds from the experiences and voices of physiotherapists who trained outside of the country—including his own—who migrated or migrated back to Canada to work. Andrion draws our attention to migration as a form of movement, one vastly under-considered in the profession despite physiotherapy's history of early practitioners migrating out of England, and over time, around the globe, bringing with them Western knowledge and practices that interrupted or otherwise interfered with local therapies. Applying critical labour migration theories, Andrion explores how physiotherapists' professional identities are shaped by colonialism, globalisation, and racial capitalism in the context of migration to work in Canada. Highlighting how de-professionalisation, racialisation, and othering occur, Andrion issues a wake-up call for physiotherapy to critically examine the present in hopes for a better future.

How to resist physiotherapy's colonising foundation? *Ukuyankaza kuyi-Nkululeko, Movement is freedom: Journeying towards autoethnography as a transformative qualitative research methodology*, by Mahitsonge Nomusa Ntinga and colleagues, is a creative autoethnography that explores decolonising physiotherapy. Weaving her Indigenous isiZulu language into letters to her younger self—who she names Himore, a physiotherapist-in-training—Ntinga reclaims her cultural identity and voice alongside her identities as physiotherapist and academic within a profession that seeks to erase her Blackness, Indigeneity, and feminism. The result is a moving autoethnographic account highlighting the beauty of her culture and identity. It is also a call for movement in a profession that erases cultural identity to embrace Western epistemologies, values, beliefs, and hierarchies. The chapter creates new freedoms of movement, showing how autoethnography can be a methodological vehicle to support this.

How can phenomenology help us shift physiotherapy? Using auto-phenomenology, Clair Hebron reflects on her experiences in *Unbelonging: The experience of being-in-society whilst living with frozen shoulder*. As a physiotherapist and educator with a grasp of phenomenological theories, Hebron reflects on the changes in her interactions and identity that her frozen shoulder brought, including a strong exercise-based identity which many physiotherapists share. Hebron glides between her rich stories of her own

experiences and her phenomenological interpretation of them, sharing what is often unarticulated about how lives can change when bodies do. Hebron offers an evocative, knowing account of the *unhomelikeness* of frozen shoulder to spark meaningful dialogue within physiotherapy about our identities and personal investments that shape how we practice.

The second part of the book, *Relinquishing stability and risking movement*, charts new movements in physiotherapy. These movements relinquish old forms of stability and control, showing different ways to enact and embody new directions, with one chapter showing the opposite, of how multiplicity is reduced to a singularity. Education features prominently, including experiments—purposeful or naturally occurring—that spur new forms of learning and being.

What do we lose when we seek to normalise physical movements? Sarah Schwab-Farrell and colleagues' *Destabilising the norm: A critical experimental approach to move physiotherapy beyond movement "normalisation"* highlight the Global North construction of normality as good, which has vast socio-political impacts. In physiotherapy, "normality as good" is assumed in everyday practices, such as the work to "normalise" people's bodily movements after having a stroke. Using critical theory with experimental research—which they call "critical experimental studies"—they found that standard physiotherapy practice emphasising normalisation may have unintended and negative functional movement consequences, including a reduced capacity for movement adaptation after a stroke. The authors argue for a physiotherapy that hews less to "the norm" and instead reorients physiotherapy "active affordances": active, creative, improvisational, embodied explorations that make performance of everyday tasks possible for disabled people.

How does participation in solidarity movements for justice impact physiotherapists? In *"The impact of the occupation remains with us": Movements of minor education during political mobilisation of physiotherapy students at a federal university in southern Brazil*, physiotherapy academics Daniela Lagranha, Adriane Vieira, and Alex Branco Fraga share impacts of a student movement called Ocupa ESEFID. Brazilian university students organised against constitutional changes, budget constraints, and inequities impacting access to higher education. The students occupied their university campus for two months, disrupted established hierarchies in campus life, organised systems of collective care, led on-campus political activities, and collaborated

with other organizations in their communities who were also fighting constitutional changes. Thinking with the major and minor education concepts introduced by the Brazilian pedagogue Silvio Gallo, the authors detail how the participating physiotherapy students became part of a broader resistance that fought for collective understandings of health, better integration of identity and anti-oppression in the classroom, and commitments to combat violence, harassment, and discrimination affecting students. Though the occupation ended with the successful passage of constitutional changes, the students' minor education shifted their career plans and strengthened curricular attention to topics that the students' movement raised as underdeveloped, including "access to physiotherapy services in Brazil, the health of the black population, the health of systematically oppressed people, experiences of transgender people in an academic environment, emotional suffering among physiotherapy students, and health of outsourced workers."

How to move toward equity and social justice in health professions? Patty Thille, Zoe Leyland, and Liz Harvey share how critical theory and pedagogy can create spaces for new dialogues in *Disrupting the ongoing flow of weight stigma in physiotherapy: The value of critical reflection*. Collecting data before, during, and after a workshop introducing Canadian physiotherapists to patients' concerns about contemporary physiotherapy practice, as well as theories of stigma and weight stigma, the workshop walked through strategies to address anti-fatness and pro-thinness in physiotherapy. Orienting to Boler and Zembylas's pedagogy of discomfort and an aim to spark critical reflection as theorised by Kinsella, the workshop used arts-informed strategies to make the familiar strange and created room for vulnerability and exploration. The chapter highlights the importance of participants' grappling with past harms as part of the path toward new possibilities.

Who belongs in physiotherapy? This is the core question Cathy Bulley and colleagues raise in *Belonging and identity in physiotherapy*. Applying Habermas's concepts of human interests to the hidden curriculum in physiotherapy, the authors explore factors that have and continue to contribute to the profession's limited attention to issues of rights, self-determination, and justice. They trace how the privileging of the technical and practical co-exists with a de-emphasis of the critical domain in physiotherapy. Working through the example of professional identity—specifically, ideas about the ideal physiotherapist as a "white, fit, young, slim, cis-gendered and able-bodied

person”—Bulley and co-authors highlight the necessity of critical examination of professional socialisation, and who it excludes. The further a student is from “the norm,” the more it fosters unbelonging, experienced as acculturation stress and identity dissonance. The authors conclude sharing possible directions, including taking up a multi-cultural understanding of identity, and a commitment to supporting belonging through reflexivity and humility.

How are otherwise physiotherapies undermined? This is the question that Dahl-Michelsen and colleagues interrogate in *Power dynamics of knowledge in physiotherapy education: The case of Mensendieck*. The chapter traces the co-existence of two different movement traditions guiding Norwegian physiotherapy education: the Mensendieck and the Oslo School. Applying Foucault’s concept of the *dispositif*, the authors unwrap changes over time that led, eventually, to the closure of the Mensendieck school. The privileging of abstract knowledge in the form of a quantitative “evidence-base” combined with an emphasis on cost-efficiencies in post-secondary educational institutions created a knowledge/power dynamic, one that led to the loss of an already existing otherwise physiotherapy. The chapter functions, in part, as a cautionary tale about the desire for universality in physiotherapy.

Part 3, *Rupturing movements and radical imaginations*, invites bigger leaps into new terrain. Each chapter actively embraces the unfinishedness that is the dialogical and pluriversal.

How might arts-based experiments help physiotherapy escape its current terrain? Shirley Chubb and Clair Hebron, fine arts and physiotherapy academics respectively, envision new ways to unsettle and explore physiotherapy in *Art as a deterritorialising vehicle for a nomadic physiotherapy*. Coming from disciplines that address the physical body in different ways, the authors engage with new materialist theories and creative practices to share how transdisciplinarity can spark movement toward otherwise physiotherapies. Using low back pain—a common, fluctuating, and often medically unexplained problem—as their core example, they imagine possibilities for nomadic and rhizomatic physiotherapies. By moving to new places and making new connections, existing hierarchies in physiotherapy (such as therapist/patient) begin to break down. This allows for uncertain, generative engagements among humans and non-humans. The movement metaphors in Deleuze and Guattari’s theories—nomadic, rhizomatic—make “deterritorialisation” possible. New relations

and entanglements, bring into being new realities, demonstrated through their Posthuman Walking Project.

Is physiotherapy stuck in dressage metaphors of walking? Tobba Sudmann drifts through different theoretical terrains in *Walking, mobility, and movement in physiotherapy*. She starts her meandering in physiotherapy, where walking is something to be normalised, akin to dressage training for horses. Such an orientation is more than just individualistic; it erases difference and blocks the creative possibilities of “horsing around.” Thinking with philosophers, sociologists, geographers, Sudmann highlights how walking is also a meaningful social practice, one which can be liberatory, creative, trust-generating, alienating, or oppressive. Wandering into the social world, Sudmann challenges physiotherapy to consider walking and other movements as communicative forms, and to travel toward less disciplinary forms.

What could a turn to post-humanism do to our profession’s understanding of therapy? David Nicholls, Matthew Low, and Filip Maric explore this question in *The possibilities for a posthuman physiotherapy*. Building from the theories of Deleuze, the authors question the growing interest in humanism as a guiding theory for physiotherapy. While Western humanism moves beyond body-as-machine, it carries with it ideas of the ideal human, rife with hierarchical ideas about superiority and inferiority that have justified colonisation, patriarchy, genocide, ecological devastation and more. Reviewing some aspects of Deleuze’s and other post-humanist theories, the authors “open therapy up to the more-than-human, and allow for a much broader view of who or what could be considered therapeutic.” Through this theoretical lens, the authors highlight how therapy is not just done or experienced by humans, and how physiotherapy’s emphasis on humans alone reduces creativity and freedom of movement. The chapter raises critical questions, including what the political future of physiotherapy as a profession can be if we work from a posthuman understanding of therapy. Such questions, they argue, are necessary to grapple with, given the enormous shifts in our world since the stabilisation of physiotherapy’s professional scope.

Is it possible to start writing the story of movement for physiotherapy beyond economic benefit and instrumentality? In the final chapter, Anna Ilona Rajala and Timo Uotinen explore this in *“The constant fear of ceasing to move”: Deconstructing movement in physiotherapy*. They examine the silences, erasures, and de-emphasis in physiotherapy’s understanding of movement.

Mobilising Derrida, the authors deconstruct the concept of movement within a specialised practice of Finnish psychophysical physiotherapy. They expose the binaries that create meaning in this practice, such as human/animal, where each defined as not-the-other, and within which a hierarchy exists. Deconstructive reading makes the binaries and hierarchies more obvious, and experiments with possible reconstructions and/or decomposition. In doing so, new spaces and possibilities open. Refusing a conclusion, the chapter offers a call for ongoing unsettling in our understandings of movement.

This refusal to conclude, to offer a finalised account, is a movement we echo as editors. Critical physiotherapy is continually in a process of becoming, a movement still in progress. This anthology both contributes to, and invites more, critical movements within physiotherapy.

Notes

- 1 Gibson, B. E., Nicholls, D. A., Setchell, J., & Groven, K. S. (Eds.). (2018). *Manipulating practices: A critical physiotherapy reader* Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.29>. Nicholls, D. A., Groven, K. S., Kinsella, E. A., & Anjum, R. (Eds.). (2021). *Mobilizing knowledge in physiotherapy: Critical reflections on foundations and practices*. Routledge.

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