

## Figuring Bodies: Bringing a Humanities Perspective to Disability Studies

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The last twenty years have witnessed the development and expansion of the field of disability studies, moving it well beyond a traditional medical model (indeed, making central to its project resistance to and revision of that model) and extending its scope to include legal and political, sociological, and pedagogical perspectives. Still largely absent from the field, however, is a humanities perspective, one which examines the historical, cultural, and literary meanings of disability. A fuller understanding of those matrices can further enrich our reading of disability, both past and present.

There is no "best" author, period, or genre to examine in terms of disability studies - Plato, Augustine, and Descartes have all clearly shaped modern representations of the body (and mind). But I want to suggest here that the encoding of corporeal bodies which occurred in Victorian culture has had a critical impact on current popular understandings of disability. As Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin have noted, the concept of a physical "norm" per se did not exist prior to the nineteenth century. In his theories of carnival and the carnivalesque, Bakhtin suggests that the masks and voices of carnival were transgressive and helped maintain a space where difference, excess, and the grotesque challenged homogeneity and redeployed high cultural standards. During the nineteenth century, though, according to Bakhtin, "That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits . . .) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated" (cited in Russo, p. 79). In other words, difference becomes fraught with meaning, and difference seen as negative or unnatural is concealed or else punished. This "elimination" of difference occurred along with the professionalization of a medical community. A proliferation of medical discourses endorsed a specific reading of physiology and materiality that excluded bodies constituted as Other: racialized, hysterical, poor, and, by extension, disabled bodies. At the same time, all bodies, but especially "deviant" ones, came to be "managed" by modern systems of power which regulated and normalized them and thus invested the disabled body with a network of (largely negative) meanings. The systematic creation and maintenance of prisons, poor houses, and asylums made bodies the government's business; as Michael Oliver puts it, "the institution became the major mechanism of social control" (p. 32).

England's imperial mission further fostered an attitude of suspicion towards difference (racial, religious, physical) which marginalized individuals with disabilities. Darwin's publications and theories of social Darwinism naturalized a "survival of the fittest" mentality whereby those perceived to lack economic and/or physical autonomy fell under the rubric of England's colonized: disempowered,

outside, alien. As Sander Gilman has noted in *Difference and Pathology*, representations of England's colonized populations emphasized physical as well as cultural differences to justify imperial policies. Thus the "excessive" sexuality of the African woman, labelled the "Hottentot Venus," was "explained" by her enlarged genitalia. In much the same way that the body of the cultural other was thus denaturalized, so too was the body of the individual with disabilities. As Susan Stewart puts it, "all colonization involves the taming of the beast by bestial methods and hence the conversion and projection of the animal and human, difference and identity" (p. 110). The perhaps apocryphal claim of Joseph Merrick, known more popularly as the Elephant Man - "I am not an animal" - connects his "condition" to that of England's colonial subjects, reduced to the status of non-human Others.

Building upon medical and imperial discourses, cultural critics like Thomas Carlyle and James Phillips Kay described England's social ills with metaphors of infirmity and disability and linked physical "deviance" with moral decay; increasingly, a "deformed" moral nature comes to be housed in a "deformed" body during the nineteenth century. Religious philosophers like Charles Kingsley, proponent of "muscular Christianity," further enforced that link in sermons and novels in which physical stamina is equated with moral strength. At the other extreme, the individual with disabilities becomes moral martyr or tragic figure, in the tradition of Dickens' Tiny Tim or blind Margaret in Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton*. That the infirm bodies increasingly used to represent England's social ills were marked as well by class, gender, and ethnicity indicates the complex identity categories within which a cultural coding of disability emerged. In Victorian culture, as in today's, disability was linked with lower economic standing, and the individual with disabilities was perceived as asexual. (1)

As Lennard Davis has pointed out in *Enforcing Normalcy*, the "holy trinity" of race, class, and gender needs to be further complicated by the introduction of disability, which is very much a part of an evolving rhetoric of class, vocation, and national identity in the nineteenth century and which continues to inform current conceptions of the body and embodiment. For instance, discourses about AIDS and about AIDS patients continue the Victorian practice of equating physical and moral stature. And much popular rhetoric continues to invoke that trinity, as in discussions of abortion, addiction, and eating disorders. For instance, drug addiction is often represented as a problem primarily of African-American communities, while obesity is often considered a problem primarily of women of lower-class status.

In a similar way, the ideology of autonomy which becomes central in Victorian culture continues to shape twentieth-century responses to disability. The modern belief in individualism and hard work was born in the nineteenth century and nurtured by the growth of a middle class which seemed to suggest that

perseverance and commitment to a career would "pay off." Samuel Smiles' best-seller, *Self-Help* (published 1859), promised that "Energy accomplishes more than genius" and guaranteed financial success to those willing to work energetically enough. At the margins of such rhetoric is the implicit message that those who fail to work "hard enough" - or those unable to work hard enough - are both moral failures and a drain on England's financial resources. That message is echoed in current discourses (legislative, media, political) which seek to reduce SSI and which critique ADA requirements on both economic and ethical bases (i.e., "Not all businesses can afford to make their buildings accessible, and besides, it's time for people in this country to stop depending on hand-outs and special rights"). In both historical periods, disability becomes what Judith Butler calls the "necessary outside" - the negative term - against which "normalcy" (which includes economic as well as physical characteristics) is constituted.

My point is that our response to and experience of disability has a historical, discursive, and literary context. We can more fully understand that context by adding a humanities perspective to the field of disability studies and, in turn, create a place for material bodies to be more fully considered in literary theory and criticism. Despite a proliferation of texts whose titles suggest that they will consider bodies - Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*, Mary Poovey's *Making a Social Body*, to cite just a few - the lived body and specifically the disabled body is too often missing from their analyses. And those feminists and postmodernist scholars who *have* focused on the material body have similarly ignored issues of disability, focusing instead on issues of sexuality, social formations, and psychoanalytic concerns. (2) Though each of these of these areas are clearly important, as Susan Bordo notes, "We deceive ourselves if we believe that poststructuralist theory is attending to the 'problem of difference' so long as so many concrete others are excluded from the conversation" (*Unbearable Weight*, p. 223).

Fortunately, scholars have begun to bring disability studies into this conversation. In *Enforcing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis excavates the historical bases for cultural assumptions about deafness; in *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland Thomas examines the various meanings of disability in nineteenth-century American literature and culture; in *Freakery*, edited by Thomson, a number of authors consider literary and cultural aspects of disability in their essays; and in a forthcoming book edited by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, numerous essays incorporate a humanities perspective in their readings of disability.

These authors substantially enrich both disciplines. Their efforts, however, have to be continued and validated by scholars both in the humanities and in the field of disability studies in order for the dialogue and its revisionary potential to most fully resonate.

## Notes

1. See Michael Oliver's *The Politics of Disablement*, Chapter 2, for information on poverty and disability.

2. A few such titles include Judith R. Walkowitz's *Prostitution and Victorian Society*; Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*; Margaret Homan's *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing*; and *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, edited by Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth.

## Works Cited

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