

**"A Poor Crippled Woman":
Disability Identity in a Southern Mill Village**

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Theorizing about disability identity has been a necessary and worthwhile activity for scholars in the field of disability studies. Far too little work, however, has been done on the history of disability identity and what it consisted of in times and places different from our own. Thus theories of disability identity either draw from the present for examples or from past cultural representations of disability that are not always placed in historical context and/or are used to make sweeping generalizations. And although this is sometimes done in a brilliantly insightful way, it is time for more in depth studies of specific historical examples. Such studies will provide not only ways of seeing if current theorizing adequately explains specific cases, but also a way of stimulating new theoretical insights.

Examining historical examples forces disability scholars to confront another variety of difference - the otherness as well as the familiarity of the past. Such analysis can begin to help us see how in the past individuals with disabilities have constructed their identities. And the writing of disability history will contribute to the ongoing creation of disability culture and identity. The history of disability identity will often provide analysis and narratives about disability in the past that will not fully fit the sense of disability identity that many in today's disability community would like to create. Nevertheless, we cannot choose our ancestors and we can only learn from them when we view them in as much of their complexity as we can retrieve. As a contribution to the enormous task that historians have only begun to address, this essay will examine evidence of disability identity among textile workers in the American South in the 1930s.

Historians have discovered a pervasive sense of mutual obligation and reciprocity in the southern mill village. They claim the family metaphor, not paternalism, was central to the history of mill workers. They find that women were often at the center of communal networks of mutual aid.¹ Although historians have examined the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) interviews done as part of New Deal work relief program in the 1930s and conducted their own interviews, they have ignored disability. They have not seen that attention to how mill workers and mill management responded to disability in the family and the mill community illuminate the depth of the feelings of obligation and neighborliness and commitment to the values of reciprocity and exchange.

In the late 1930s, the FWP conducted a series of life history interviews with ordinary southerners. This project was concerned mainly with the transformation of the South from an agrarian to an industrial way of life, with the quality of life in the mill village, and with employee/employer relations.² It did not occur to members of the FWP that disability was an integral part of many textile workers' lives and that attention to disability would help them understand the larger questions about mill village life that did capture their interest. Disability was such an important part of the individual lives of textile workers, and of family and community life, that many interviewees felt compelled to talk about it. And in some cases, they talked about it to assert their disability identity.³

What does it mean to assert a disability identity in a textile mill village, a world that while not far removed from an agrarian way of life was also the cutting edge of the industrializing process in the South? It is not a question that historians have tried to answer, although examining the whole subject of disability in the life of the mill village would have illuminated a host of topics that historians have considered important, such as the relationship between management and employees, whether or not paternalism was the dominant ethos of the mill village, and a sense of mutual responsibility in the mill worker community. It was a world in which textile workers sometimes developed a class identity that reflected their conflict with mill owners, knowledge that they were looked down upon by most white southerners as "lintheads," and their own cultural traditions and communal identity. It was

also a world in which traditional "old-time" fundamentalist Christianity with its emphasis on salvation and the after-life exercised a pervasive influence. Company welfare programs introduced mill workers to a medical model of illness that in some ways conflicted with their traditional religious views.

In their struggles with management, some workers sought to organize unions. Unions, like the medical establishment, would be rejected by some mill workers as an illegitimate rival to the authority of their churches. How does a person with a disability negotiate her life, her physical difference in such a world? Could a female textile worker in such a world insist on her disability identity? In the case of Ollie Farrington of Charlotte, North Carolina, the answer is yes. And that is why her "story" deserves careful analysis. It is important to note that Farrington was aware of being disabled before she ever went to school, held a job, or established herself as a member of the community. A person in the textile mill community who became disabled later in life would be likely to have a different sense of disability identity.⁴

Despite the isolation and oppression she had experienced as a disabled person Farrington identified with other disabled individuals. In some circumstances, it may not be as difficult as disability scholars have assumed for isolated and oppressed individuals with disabilities to imagine a community of disabled individuals with whom they could identify despite the fact that this entails identifying with a stigma that contributes to their oppression.⁵ Farrington closed the interview with the declaration: "Now that is my story. A person can't tell anything like they want to when they are asked to tell it, but I am hoping it will help somebody else that is crippled to make a new start in life and be able to carry on."⁶

One should be careful not to conclude hastily that in her interview Farrington is seeking only to demonstrate her own competence in dealing with her disability and constructing a common inspirational narrative of hope and overcoming.⁷ It is important to examine how that type of narrative is complicated in this case by Farrington's attitude toward the class struggle she consciously participates in. In the course of her interview she tries to determine for herself the relative moral authority of the church, the medical establishment, the union, and the mill management in her struggles as "a poor crippled woman."⁸ Her story indicates that, in the words of one scholar, "the disabled body is not a discrete object but rather a set of social relations."⁹ In this case, Farrington's social relations are to family, to the mill village, to factory management, to religious faith, to the medical establishment, and to the labor movement. These social relations are part of ongoing historically constructed discourses.

Farrington developed her disability identity in the context of these ideologies. Her situation as a disabled individual in a southern mill village cannot be adequately grasped in terms of life in a face-to-face community verses a more impersonal society.¹⁰ Nor can it be entirely understood as the creation of a modern discourse that seeks to control and regulate the body. Michel Foucault's work can help disability scholars historicize disability and move beyond the extraordinarily suggestive and useful but ahistorical work by Erving Goffman on stigma. Nevertheless schematic views extrapolating from Foucault's work should stimulate research rather than substitute for it. Schematized versions of history should not become a way of regulating, controlling, and missing, and even perhaps dismissing, the complexity of the lived experience and sense of identity of disabled individuals who lived in the past. Farrington lived her life as "a poor crippled woman" in a world that will not fit neatly on either side of a line dividing history into pre-industrial and industrial phases. Nor can her lived historical experience be easily classified as taking place entirely within a premodern or modern ideological discourse about the body and identity.

In referring to herself as "a poor crippled woman," Farrington indicates she has a sense of the relationship between class, disability, and gender, and how these factors helped shape her circumstances and identity: "You know we have always been poor. I never got to go to school none hardly." While at the beginning of the paragraph in which she makes this statement it seems that poverty explains her lack of education, it is also true that by the end of the paragraph this is no longer her point: "I went to about the fourth grade, but I have learned a lot just by reading good books. You know

a person can learn a lot just by listening and watching other people. I have always been a cripple and couldn't get out and mingle with other folks, but I could watch the ones that come here and learn a lot from them." The idea that a "crippled" person cannot "mingle with other folks" was unquestioningly accepted by both the interviewer and the interviewee.¹¹

In this face-to-face community, Farrington could neither imagine an educational system that would accommodate her disability nor a mill village world in which she should be able to mingle with people by using assistive technology, living in an accessible environment, and participating in a community that accepted and accommodated individuals with disabilities. By reading and listening and watching nondisabled people, Farrington used her intelligence to compensate for her lack of formal education. On the surface it would seem that she has reversed the process of staring and made the nondisabled the object of her gaze rather than the other way around. However, Farrington studied the nondisabled in order to learn to be like them. They would not have studied her in the way she studied them. If she saw herself as "overcoming," who can blame her given the possibilities which she and others in her community could imagine for a disabled person. Her isolation and segregation may not only explain her efforts to compensate for and overcome her disability, but may have also led her to view her disability as a shaping force in her life and sense of identity. Furthermore, compensating and overcoming was not her only strategy. She created a disability identity within a framework of familiar competing ideologies and limited opportunities for change.

Farrington described having to choose between individual and collective strategies for coping with and trying to change her circumstances, as did other mill workers. While the mill owners excluded blacks from jobs in their factories, they did not exclude white women, although jobs were classified along gender lines. Nor did management exclude the disabled from work in the mills if there were jobs they could work at as well as able-bodied workers. Both management and workers viewed mill families as productive units of labor. Management provided housing to attract families and to make them dependent on employment in the mill. To stay in mill provided housing someone in the family had to be working in the mill. Mill families, like the Farringtons, thought in terms of a household, not an individual, income. Farrington had to make decisions in terms of how those decisions might affect her family, not just herself. She could not think of herself only as an autonomous individual.

Farrington struggled to reconcile faith in traditional religious values with faith in modern medicine. She arrived at a position that she found satisfying. She was, however, unable to reconcile traditional emphasis on individual effort and salvation with collective action. Her description of her disability and her work situation are informative about her impairment and her poverty and their interrelationship: "When I was born my ankles were weak and I was three years old before I ever walked a step -then I would take a few steps and fall down. I have gone through my whole life with weak ankles." In practical terms, that meant: "I used to work fifty five hours a week and when Sunday come I would just sit in one place almost all Sunday trying to get some relief [sic] so I could go back to work Monday refreshed. Papa wont [sic] making much . . ."¹²

Farrington's narrative of seeking medical help weaves together a traditional reliance on prayer with a respect for the expertise of the professional health care system in a way that incorporates the latter system into the older religious framework. Mill workers, like Farrington, asked in Christian terms the great theological questions that have stirred human beings from time immemorial: "I have always tried to live the christian [sic] life, and I decided that maybe I was suffering so much because I had not lived the life that He wanted me to live." She looked for a causal explanation of her disability, for "her suffering," that would not lead her to question her faith. She initially regarded her suffering as punishment she had brought on herself; however, she does not stop there.¹³

In the course of telling her story, Farrington provides an explanation - perhaps a retrospective and stylized personal experience narrative that had been told and retold on numerous occasions - of how she acquired the braces that improved her mobility and stamina. In times of excruciating pain, Farrington contemplated how "I would be a lot better off if I could just die and get out of it." She,

however, rejected that as "the coward's way out of a thing." She recalled an occasion when her father wanted to call a doctor to give her a pain killer. She asked her father to wait, while she prayed about which doctor to see: "I lay there in bed and prayed as I never prayed before, and I was led to this part of scripture, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.' The days of miracles are not past. I prayed with all my might and at the same time believed he would hear me, and He led me to Dr. Green." She did not reject traditional religious strategies, such as prayer, for a new faith in medical authority. Instead, she found a way to make the appearance of Dr. Green an answer to her prayers and, in her view, God's choice. A skeptic might see her as the author of both her prayers and her revelation experience. What is impressive here, however, is not a conversion experience (although in that time and place that is the script that is already present for Farrington) but the syncretic direction in which she takes the promise of salvation through conversion and health restored through medical treatment.¹⁴

Historians have studied the attitude of middle class professionals toward mill workers. Less analyzed are the reactions of mill workers to the new class of professional experts that they came into contact with through their mill village experience. Historian David Carlton, however, has written perceptively about the mill workers' resistance to the medical experts and other middle class professionals. Southern laborers found many middle class experts patronizing and ready to use classificatory schemes to assign them degrading labels. On the other hand, the move to the mill involved a decision, more or less conscious, to enter a world of middle class experts and routines.¹⁵ By making Dr. Green an answer to her prayers, Farrington participates in choosing her doctor and making him an agent of God, not an imperial scientist with his own specialist claims to truth. Thus, perhaps this experience makes it possible for Farrington to be able to speak back to medical authority, despite her gratitude for the braces: "At first he told me I would have to quit the mill, but I explained to him that it would be impossible because Papa wont making much money and we owed so much money."¹⁶

Farrington participated in the collective attempts of mill workers at her Charlotte, North Carolina, mill to gain some leverage in dealing with management - leverage that she hoped would change the lives of working class people, and her life as a disabled individual. She was initially enthusiastic about union organizing efforts: "I felt then like I would never go back to work until we had won our point." A shortage of groceries and a pile of unpaid bills eventually led her to cross the picket lines and return to work. This is a story of defeat and of Farrington's defending her own role in participating in that defeat.¹⁷

Farrington's criticism of mill management is made in the context of defeat and in the context of her identity as a disabled working class. She found herself back at work in a factory run by an uncontested management eager to raise productivity through what textile workers like Farrington called the "stretch-out" and defined as "make one do the work of two." She concluded, "I still think its [sic] a shame to work a poor crippled woman like that, but there is nothing I can do about it."¹⁸

It is significant that in the wake of the defeat of the union at her mill, Farrington begins to reconsider the relative value of the union movement and of her church: "Yes, the union is broke up over here. I wouldn't belong to it again for nothing. There's still a few that go to the meeting, I don't reckon they have a dozen members and they meet on Sundays when they ought to be in church somewhere." In choosing the church over the union, she also rejects the ideology of the labor movement and positively reevaluates management's point of view: "The mill company has got the money and they ain't going to pay no more than they have to for getting the work done, and you can't blame them for it. If you was working for me I'd get all I could out of you for as little money as possible. That's human nature." In fact, it appears that she sees the benefits of medicine and faith as the solution to what she has again come to view as her individual problems: "since Dr. Green has put these braces on me, I don't mind doing extra work. . . . Another thing I am walking closer with God. . . . I have learned to let him share my troubles and I find it works out fine." This, however, does not mark the end of her story, nor a final resolution of her identity as a disabled woman.¹⁹

At the end of the interview, Farrington outlines a religious strategy and individualistic tac-

tics for coping with a world where collective solutions have failed. Prayer she believes will make her well. That plus individual effort, she trusts, will allow her a victory denied to unions: "God has been so good to me and I am sure He will be to any body else if they will only put their trust in Him." Learning to take dictation, a fairly sedentary and traditionally female job, is all the upward mobility "a poor crippled woman" living in a nonunionized textile mill can realistically imagine. God's goodness and night school she hopes will be her ticket out of a mill world in which the collective solutions offered by the union movement were crushed.²⁰

Rejecting the defeated union movement, Farrington begins to imagine herself in terms of the autonomous individual subject Foucault associated with modernity. To do this she rejects collective solutions in favor of an ideal of leaving the mill to better herself, to rise to a kind of middle-class status. And yet, she concludes this interview by returning to the subject of her disability, which she has insisted on making central to her interview. She is hoping her interview will allow her to speak with other disabled individuals about disability. It is her voice she wants them to hear, her subjective experience she wants them to learn about. She is not an object to be studied, but a voice she hopes other disabled individuals will listen to. Her identity "politics," however, have moved from the brief period when she was part of a labor movement that was trying to transform a hierarchical society and challenge the privilege of the few at the expense of the many to a focus on upward mobility as the solution to her individual struggle.

Farrington recounts for other disabled individuals what Simi Linton in *Claiming Disability* refers to as "the adaptive maneuvers" disabled individuals make in "a world configured for nondisabled people." Community emerges as disabled individuals share this information as part of their individual and communal identity. "The material that binds" disabled individuals who claim a disability identity, Linton writes, "is the art of finding one another, of identifying and naming disability in a world reluctant to discuss it."²¹

Despite her isolation, Farrington imagines a disability community interested in her disability experience. Her interview also raises the question of how identity politics fits or does not fit into larger political commitments. If, as Linton points out, part of what creates a disability community is "unearthing historically and culturally significant material that relates to our experience," then Farrington's story deserves our attention. It will also contribute to an understanding of the complexity of forming a disability identity in an ableist culture. It may also help us understand the many disabled individuals in the present who have not entered today's disability rights movement stage of disability identity - individuals who construct their disability identities in cultural contexts where the ideological discourse of traditional religion, medical authority, and individual overcoming remain strong. For a brief moment, Farrington's sense of disability identity and participation in a broader movement to reconstruct society happened to intersect, a phenomenon far too rare today among disabled individuals who either do or do not identify with the contemporary disability movement. We need to understand the many disabled individuals in the present who, while they have not entered today's disability rights movement stage of disability identity, have things to say that we have been unable to hear.

Notes

1. These are major themes in Jacquelyn Hall, et al., *Like A Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

2. For published collection of FWP interviews see, *These Are Our Lives, As Told By the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939) and Tom Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, eds., *Such As Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979). The vast majority of FWP southern life histories are in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The FWP interviews are also available in a microfiche edition. See Jerrold Hirsch, ed., *Federal Writers' Project Southern Life Histories Collection, Microfiche collection* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc., 1983). Hereinafter FWP-UMI.

3. For an examination of disability in the context of life in the southern mill village see Jerrold and Karen Hirsch, "Disability in the Family?: New Questions About the Southern Mill Village," Special issue "Al Margen: La Historia de la Discapacidad," *Historia Y Fuente Oral* 13 (1995): 15-33.
4. Mary P. Brown, untitled interview with Ollie Farrington, Charlotte, N.C., July 27, 1939, FWP-UMI, 4035, 4040-4041.
5. See James I. Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 78-79.
6. Brown, untitled interview with Ollie Farrington, 4040-4041.
7. For a discussion of this type of disability narrative see Benedicte Ingstad and Susan Reynolds Whyte, eds., "Introduction," *Disability and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 20.
8. Mary P. Brown, FWP interviewer, untitled interview with Ollie Farrington, Charlotte, N. C., July 27, 1939, FWP-UMI, 4039.
9. Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 11.
10. For a discussion of the disability experience in small communities and in more impersonal societies see, Jessica Scheer and Nora E. Groce, "Impairment as a Human Constant: Cross-cultural and Historical Perspectives on Variation," *Journal of Social Forces* 44 (1988): 23-37 and Ingstad and Whyte, "Introduction," pp. 12-15.
11. Brown untitled interview with Farrington, 4035, 4040-4041.
12. *Ibid.*, 4034-4035.
13. *Ibid.*, 4034-4035.
14. Brown untitled interview with Farrington, 4035-4036.
15. David Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina: 1880-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 233-239.
16. Brown untitled interview with Farrington, 4036.
17. *Ibid.*, 4035.
18. *Ibid.*, 4035.
19. *Ibid.*, 4039.
20. *Ibid.*, 4038-4039.
21. *Ibid.*, 4039-4040.
22. Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press), 5.