

## **Body Criticism as a Context for Disability Studies**

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A new genre has recently emerged in the branch of qualitative analysis known loosely in the humanities as cultural criticism. I call this vibrant new approach to the study of cultural texts "body criticism." Arising from the growing critical interest over the last twenty-five years in (new) historicism, materialism, feminism, identity, and the political, body criticism centers on four main issues: first, the ways that the body is represented in culture; second, the ideological discourses that inform those representations; third, the political, social, and material effects of those representations; fourth, the relationships among representations, biology, and the lived body. In short, body criticism questions our collective understanding of bodily traits, form, functions, and behaviors as natural and inevitable. It contends instead that the cultural scripts we impose on bodies give them shape and significance. Most important, body criticism's focus on how culture represents differences among bodies is of greatest interest to scholars of disability studies.

Body criticism, as I am describing it, here is not yet consolidated as a disciplinary category or an institutional division, as are - for example - feminism, Queer studies, or African-American studies. Indeed, body criticism's virtue and utility is that it arches over traditional academic disciplines as well as all of the discreet "studies" born from the presence and demands of constituencies empowered by the enormous and wide-reaching changes that the various civil rights movements have generated over the last thirty years in America. Body criticism is a kind of comparative endeavor that crosses the many, sometimes balkanized identity "studies" based on ethnicity, race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. In an intellectual era often dominated in the humanities by abstract theoretical approaches, body criticism's vitality lies in its inherent insistence on the materiality of bodies and the complexity of identity in the sociopolitical world.

For disability studies - institutionalized as it is largely within a social science/medical/applied fields disciplinary matrix - body criticism can be the conduit to interdisciplinarity, to the fresh insights, approaches, and methodologies that the topic of the body elicits within the humanities and social sciences. For example, perhaps the fundamental assumption of cultural studies is that representation structures reality. Body criticism asserts that the metaphors, tropes, images, portrayals, stereotypes, caricatures, and other ideological frames through which a society represents people affect their lives. Often employing the methods of literary

criticism, body criticism “reads” representations, not just in the simple sense of tracking portrayals, but in the more complex sense of probing the signification processes which assign meaning to the material world. What I am calling body criticism analyzes and historicizes representational systems such as race, gender, ethnicity, and disability as discourses that explain and give significance to bodily particularities and the differences among bodies. Body criticism, then, has both the impulse and the potential to revise oppressive cultural narratives and to reveal liberatory ones.

Body criticism is burgeoning in the humanities and social sciences. Witness a sampling of recent “body” titles, the vast majority of which have been published in the last five years: *Body Thoughts*, *Body Matters*, *Body Talk*, *Bodylore*, *Telling Flesh*, *The Female Body*, *The Male Body*, *The Rejected Body*, *The Consuming Body*, *The Perfectible Body*, *Recovering Bodies*, *Extraordinary Bodies*, *Building Bodies*, *Flexible Bodies*, *Foreign Bodies*, *Volatile Bodies*, *Deviant Bodies*, *Imaginary Bodies*, *Posthuman Bodies*, *American Bodies*, *American Anatomies*, *Bodily Discursions*, *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, and *Disembodying Women*. While this list verges on self-parody, the explanatory subtitles of these as well as the many other books about the body indicates the remarkable depth and breadth of this vital new field of inquiry. The consistent syntax of these titles - the noun “body” or “bodies” qualified or particularized by an adjective - suggests as well that this analytical approach concerns itself with the ways that bodies are marked by culture as different, with how they are imagined to diverge from the generic “body.” Collectively, they testify to Bryan S. Turner’s observation that postmodernity has yielded a “somatic society” in which the body increasingly functions as an unstable signifier. (1) So while only a few of these studies directly address disability, all of them investigate - in remarkable variety - the cultural processes that produce the different body, the body marked by its own particularity. This is, of course, precisely the process that produces the “disabled body.” By examining how this social mechanism operates in varying historical contexts, material situations, and disciplinary registers, we can learn a good deal about the way disability functions as well.

Even though I trace body criticism’s genesis to the interest in identity politics that produced such pedagogical and scholarly principles as multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusion, much of the critical analyses on bodies issues from a few germinal thinkers. Michel Foucault is surely the father of body criticism. Several of Foucault’s concepts - such as the docile body and the regulated body, developed most fully in his 1979 study of prisons, *Discipline and Punish* - allow us to theorize and historicize the social construction of disability. The body Foucault has given us is literally shaped by culture, by discourses in the broadest sense, and is disciplined by the internalization of cultural narratives. Bodies that refuse such governing, such normalization, are of greatest interest to Foucault. Disabled bodies, of course,

resist normalization and are often the objects of invasive disciplining, although Foucault never directly addresses disability. Certainly his earlier studies *Birth of the Clinic* and *Madness and Civilization*, which focus on the pathologizing of the body and the medical gaze, also have direct implications for disability studies. While Foucault has had the greatest direct influence on body criticism, now-classic earlier work by social critics as varied as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Douglas, Erving Goffman, Frantz Fanon, Pierre Bourdieu, Stephen Jay Gould, Sander Gilman, John Berger, Elaine Scarry, Thomas Laqueur, and Bryan S. Turner, among others, has influenced and established body criticism as well.

If Foucault is the father of body criticism, feminists are its collective mother. Feminism, unlike the many critical movements that take the work of a single originator as scripture, is multivocal and without a founding figure. Indeed, the female body itself - interrogated, problematized, contested, denaturalized, narrativized - is perhaps the figure and the substance at the center of feminist inquiry. Because the gender system that produces women and "woman" is a representational one, much of the theories and methods of feminism can be applied usefully to analyze the construction of disability. For instance, the work of philosophers Susan Bordo and Iris Marion Young provides provocative forms of body criticism for disability studies. Both critics are rigorous in situating the particularized, lived, material body at the center of their cultural analyses. Both take into account the complex entanglements of representational systems. Even though Young treats disability only in some analyses and Bordo does not mention disability directly at all, the ways they investigate cultural scripts of bodily differences can be compelling models for disability studies.

Take, for example, three concepts. First is Bordo's elaboration of "plasticity as postmodern paradigm," in which she exposes the current cultural narrative that imagines human beings as inhabiting infinitely shapable bodies and being totally free from bodily determination. (2) Although she is specifically discussing here the ways that women's bodies are feminized by cosmetics, surgery, dieting, and the like, the cultural belief in the plasticity of bodies dictates the "reconstruction" and "treatment" of disabled bodies as well. A second feminist concept from body criticism which resonates for disability studies is Young's elegant analysis of the phenomenon we call "throwing like a girl." (3) Here Young shows how the female body, objectified through sexualized cultural narratives, actually enacts its status as object rather than active agent - as the male body is imagined to be - when women throw "like girls." Applied to the disabled body, this analysis can account for not just the imposition of disability by an unaccommodating environment, but for the very imprinting of social assumptions about disability on bodies.

The last concept I will mention here that resonates for disability studies is Young's exploration of "breasted experience." She speculates about alternative,

female-centered cultural narratives in which breasts are owned by women as integral to their embodied experience rather than being property of male sexuality and appropriated by the heterosexual gaze. Whereas both the previous concepts I have discussed above have been oppressive scripts, Young's notion of breasted experience explores the possibilities for affirmative, even liberatory, cultural narratives. Recognizing prudently that this is utopian, Young proceeds cautiously, eschewing fantasy and emphasizing that no place exists outside culture where breasts will ever be truly liberated. Nevertheless, her suggestion that scripts other than sexual objectification might be formulated for breasts implies that scripts other than deviance, lack, and inferiority might be available for the disabled body. (4) Recasting in this way culture readings of the disabled body - like recasting narratives of the female body - is the first step in equalizing the relations between the nondisabled and the disabled and empowering people with disabilities who have internalized culture's negative interpretations of their bodies.

In order, then, both to annul oppressive representations of disability and to access liberatory ones we need to understand precisely how they operate within social, historical, and aesthetic contexts. This is a different task from studying the history or sociology of disabled people. Analyzing the representational system that creates the social identity category of disability is an essential facet of disability studies, one that is not only a part of body criticism in general but one which can draw from the resources offered by this area of inquiry. Exposing how representation operates thus begins the work of transforming the way we think about and act within the world.

## Notes

1. Bryan S. Turner, *Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 12.
2. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.245.
3. Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 189.