Introduction – Disability Studies and the Double Bind of Representation

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The Body and Physical Difference

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or wrapped in the aura of museums, are literal signs of disablement. In the cultivated imagination, they are ideals of bodily perfection. How culturally shaped is our perception of the body? And how much disavowal or psychic investment must go into the making of that perception? A point that surfaces repeatedly and strikingly in The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability is that disability is as much a symptom of historical and cultural contingencies as it is a physical and psychological reality.

Needless to say, cultural perceptions are not always so innocuous. The slide from denegation to negation and finally destruction, all premised on isolating the pure form of the body, or the pure form of its impurity, is a path that is all too easily taken. Witness, for example, the disastrous effects of the label “degeneracy” under the Nazi regime. The purity of a concept is its danger.

How does one write the disabled body, its history, its cultural forms, and its problematic repression? However one does, the aim must not be to “conquer” disability with comprehension or to drown it out with discourse—least of all through an all too familiar kind of academic industry. Instead, body theory must begin by naming its own incomprehension in the face of disability in all its forms.

The lesson of The Body and Physical Difference is clear: writing the disabled body will mean that our most basic conceptions of the body will need to be rewritten. Body theory will itself have to acknowledge its inadequate recognition of disability to date. Like the normative ideologies of the body to which they often stand opposed, theoretical discourses of the body already contain within themselves a series of unacknowledged and/or disavowed assumptions and theories about disability. Bringing these out for inspection is one way that body theory can begin to learn something from disability studies and can intervene in them in turn.

Their collaboration already looks promising.

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I want to speak to the despisers of the body. I would not have them learn and teach differently, but merely say farewell to their own bodies—and thus become silent.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Defining Disability

This volume introduces questions on the representation of disability to critical discourses in the humanities such as the body, cultural studies, minority studies, history, and aesthetics. Historically, disability has been the province of numerous professional and academic disciplines that concentrate upon the management, repair, and maintenance of physical and cognitive incapacity. Medicine, rehabilitation, special education, sociology, psychology, and a panoply of sub-specialties have all established their scientific and social credentials (as well as their very professional legitimacy) through the “humane” study and provision of services to disabled populations that are at the outermost margins of social interest and cultural value. In fact, the value of these “healing professions” has been largely secured by their willingness to attend to populations seen as inherently lacking and unproductive within the social circuit. We rarely consider that the continual circulation of professionally sponsored stories about disabled people’s limitations, dependencies, and abnormalities proves necessary to the continuing existence of these professional fields of study. Disability has spawned and bolstered an array of professional and academic fields by symbolizing the purest example of a “special needs” community.

The predominance of disability in the biological, social, and cognitive sciences parallels an equally ominous silence within the humanities. Perhaps because disabilities are exclusively narrated as debilitating phenomena in need of medical intervention and correction, the humanities have not privileged disability as a foundational category of social experience or symbolic investment. In fact, while literary and cultural studies have resurrected social identities such as gender,
sexuality, class, and race from their attendant obscurity and neglect in the social and hard sciences, disability has suffered a distinctly different disciplinary fate. In spite of the historical reliance upon images of disability in artistic discourses and critical practices (as the essays in this volume demonstrate), our professional vocabularies and methodologies eschew analyses that allow readers to attend to the meanings of disability's omnipresent utility. What is certain in this contradictory treatment of disability in the sciences and the humanities is that in either case the disabled experience is never imagined to offer its own unique and valuable perspective.

Our notion in this volume of the pervasive absence of a disability perspective is twofold. First, we want to demonstrate that rarely do scholarly discussions of the body in the sciences or the humanities anticipate that people with disabilities are part of their readership. Thus, the idea of disabled populations, patients, or individuals is usually introduced as if they represent a separate entity outside of the written and research context of the work itself. This is still the case even in recent work on disability. For example, in a 1995 essay collection entitled Disability and Culture, the editors include work by only one author out of nearly forty contributors who identifies himself as having a disability. This problem is indicative of writing mobilized from a service-oriented perspective on behalf of people with disabilities rather than research and writing that self-consciously issues from a community of scholars with disabilities. Second, while this collection does not seek to promote scholarship on disability written only by those with disabilities, the paucity in the field of academics and researchers with disabilities points to the invisibility of disabled academics in general. As with other marginalized constituencies such as women, ethnic, and racial scholars, the study of disability will help to clear a path for a more inclusive representation of this population in the profession. A visible increase in the numbers of scholars with disabilities would radically affect the ways in which we imagine this constituency's relationship within and to social institutions.

In this volume we use the term disability to designate cognitive and physical conditions that deviate from normative ideas of mental ability and physiological function. Borrowing from the legislative definition of disability that was outlined in section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 USC 794), the Americans with Disabilities Act recognizes three distinct facets of disability: (1) the impairment of a major life function, (2) an official diagnostic record that identifies a history of an individual's impairment; and (3) a trait or characteristic that results in the stigmatization of the individual as limited or incapacitated. Such an expansive definition identifies the terms disability and disabled as denoting more than a medical condition or an essentialized "deformity" or difference. Unlike the terms handicapped and crippled, which suggest inherent biological limitations and individual abnormalities, this collection employs a definition of disability that denotes the social, historical, political, and mythological coordinates that define disabled people as excessive to traditional social circuits of interaction and as the objects of institutionalized discourses. The term does not seek to diminish or deny the variables and limitations that comprise the physical lives of disabled people, but rather to forward a notion of physicality that is cross-sectioned with and informed by narratives of malignancy, excessive dependency, and the parasitism of a special needs community. Disability provides a definition of a limited physical body that is not simultaneously assumed to be extraneous to definitions of citizenry and humanity. Approaching questions of disability in this manner allows scholars to consider the social, artistic, and political uses that disability has served. The study of disability in the humanities simultaneously delineates a unique subjectivity of disability and identifies the social phantasms projected upon the disabled subject in history.

The medical philosopher Georges Canguilhem has pointed out that "[l]ife rises to the consciousness and science of itself only through maladaptation, failure and pain," thus placing disability, illness, and the aging process all along a continuum of normative physiology rather than labeling them as abnormal pathological states of being. Yet, while categories such as illness and aging also come replete with associations of physical debility and social suspicions of diminished productivity, disability bears the onus of a permanent biological condition such as race and gender from which the individual cannot extricate him- or herself. People with disabilities, as Robert Murphy explains, suffer "a contamination of identity," for their conditions are understood to be embedded in the very fabric of their physical and moral personhood. This socially defined experience of organismic contamination situates the disabled person as one who harbors more than just a physical/cognitive limitation or difference: disability infuses every aspect of his or her social being. This equation of physical disability with social identity creates a tautological link between biology and self (imagined or real) that cannot be unmoored—the physical world provides the material evidence of an inner life (corrupt or virtuous) that is secured by the mark of visible difference. Disabled people, by definition, do not enjoy the biological luxury of recovery that informs the more transient experiences of illness, disease, or disorder. As Julia Epstein points out: "whatever their cause, diseases remain processes that follow a course . . . [whereas] disability is the absence of ability." Since diseases "follow a course" and therefore prove familiar and domesticated by virtue of a belief in their determinate status (i.e., the ability to confidently narrate their future), disability might be characterized as that which exceeds a culture's predictive capacities and effective interventions. Since effective predictions and interventions change over history, bodily differences classified as nonnormative, monstrous, or disabling also shift from one epoch to another. Yet the particular and peculiar nature of disability is this definitive unpredictability within social narratives. Disability defies correction and tends to operate according to its own idiosyncratic rules. In fact, this resistance to cure or successful
rehabilitation determines disability’s unnatural status in medical and social discourse: people with disabilities are said to be fated or unsalvageable and, thus, somehow stubbornly inhuman. They constitute a population in possession of differences that will not respond to treatment, and the resulting stigma—-to use Erving Goffman’s term 11—consequently situates the disabled person within the social space of difference that forever alienates the “afflicted” from the normative conventions of everyday social and scientific interaction.

Introduction to the editors of Disability and Culture (the work containing the previously mentioned figures) make it clear that in the majority of cultures physical difference is understood in terms of physical incapacity, special needs accommodations, and statistical deviance. 15

Consequently, while disability, at first glance, would seem to share with other socially stigmatized identities visible physical characteristics that link external or perceptible differences to internal deficits, critical parallels with other minoritized identities have been slow in coming. 16 Whereas feminist and racial discourses in the humanities have produced a significant corpus of work that exposes race, gender, sexuality, and nationality as physical markers that have accumulated historical and symbolic associations of limitation and deviance, disability has rarely been included in catalogs of marginalized social groupings. Indeed, the push to expose physical difference as an ideological phantasm has, ironically, resulted in the further reification of disability as the term absent from our social models. While physical aberrancy is often recognized as constructed and historically variable it is rarely remarked upon as its own delegitimized or policially fraught identity.

This omission spans a range of academic discourses on the “body” extending from philosophy to film studies. In the past two years alone we have seen a veritable explosion of works that foreground terms such as the body, the corporeal, and the grotesque as the material of their scholarly investigations. 17 Selected titles that emphasize these terms include the following: American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender, 18 Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,” 19 Body Criticism, 20 Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture, 21 The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity, 22 Thinking Bodies, 23 Troubled Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Postmodernism, Medical Ethics, and the Body, 24 and Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism. 25 The current popularity of the body in critical discourse seeks to incorporate issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class while simultaneously neglecting disability. These studies share a penchant for detecting social differences as they are emblemized in corporeal aberrancies. Within this common critical methodology physical difference exemplifies the evidence of social deviance even as the constructed nature of physicality itself fades from view.

Among a multitude of examples, Judith Halberstam’s study of the racial and sexual codings of gothic fiction, Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters, provides us with a case in point.

Within the nineteenth-century Gothic, authors mixed and matched a wide variety of signifiers of difference to fabricate the deviant body. Dracula, Jekyl/Hyde, and even Frankenstein’s monster before them are lumpen bodies, bodies pieced together out of the fabric of race, class, gender, and sexuality. 26

The Minoritization of Disability

Despite the renewed visibility of a vigilant civil rights activism that led to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, disabled identities pose significant difficulties for inclusion alongside other minority and identity models. This is despite the fact that 69.1 percent of disabled individuals in the United States live below the poverty line, 13 and thus by extension disabled populations exist on the outermost margins of social access to all influential cultural institutions. Recent figures of the World Health Organization identify disabled people as comprising 6 or 7 percent of any given population and indicate that there are about 240 million disabled people globally. 14 Such figures define a population that represents one of the largest minority groups in the world. Although cultures radically vary in their treatment and definition of this value-laden constituency,
The preceding quotation crystallizes the strategic move endemic to much of our current critical commentary. The location of monstrosity with visible bodily deformation demonstrates that monsters themselves host an array of disabilities that hypermark them as social abominations. Yet, when we turn our critical attention to the rationale undergirding this superfluous bodily distortion, inevitably disability metamorphoses into the signifier of “race, class, gender, and sexuality.” While this important critical elision is not intended to deny that “lumpen bodies” are racialized, sexed, and/or classed, their identification quickly usurps and outdistances the physical characteristics that signaled an ideologically constructed body in the first place.

Such an observation marks the representational double bind of disability. While disabled populations are firmly entrenched on the outer margins of social power and cultural value, the disabled body also serves as the raw material out of which other socially disempowered communities make themselves visible. While deformities of the surface signal an ideologically inflected body, disability is rarely coupled with the othering terms of this critical chain of identities. In fact, once the bodily surface is exposed as the phantasmatic facade that disguises the workings of patriarchal, racist, heterosexist, and upper class norms, the monstrous body itself is quickly forgotten. This jettisoning of the monstrous body allows critics to point out that physical difference is a constructed phenomenon. Any attempt to distance disenfranchised communities from the fantasy of deformity further entrenches the disabled as the “real” abnormality from which all other nonnormative groups must be distanced. Within these theories the disabled body represents both a projection of dominant ideology and the source of a verifiable malignancy that must be refuted.

These scenarios point to a veritable panic in our current critical discussion of the meaning of monstrosity and physical (or cognitive) aberrancy. Not only has disability been used as a sign that links politics to aesthetics in criticism; it has held down the terms of a critique of a uniquely modern social disorder. The influential postmodern philosopher, Paul Virilio, in concert with other commentators who bemoan the vagaries and insubstantialities of the age of hyperext, designates disabled constituencies as the common denominator of a contemporary penchant for self-willed immobility and technological dependency. In the opening essay of the collection Re-Thinking Technologies, Virilio quotes François Mitterand’s peroration at an international colloquium on the handicapped: “Cities will have to be adapted to their citizens, and not the other way around. We must open the city to handicapped citizens. I demand that a global politics for a disabled citizenry is central to social Europe.” Virilio includes Mitterand’s articulation of the politicized nature of architecture and city planning in order to demonstrate how demands for accessible environments threaten to make special needs citizens of us all. His commentary upon the demand to adapt cities appropriates Mitterand’s point as symptomatic of a dangerous postmodern mind-set.

If every one of us is obviously in agreement that the handicapped person has to live as others do and therefore with others, it is no less revealing to note the similarities that now exist between the reduced mobility of the equipped invalid and the growing inertia of the over-equipped, “valid” human population.

Even though Virilio begins his remark with a nod toward liberal inclusivity, disabled populations become the exemplary consumers of a world characterized by the alienating distance of telecommunications that keep citizens at home and out of the loop of a more genuine and robust social interaction. Virilio’s comparison of the “reduced mobility of the equipped invalid” with the “growing inertia of the over-equipped, ‘valid’ human population,” though deliberately scandalous, nonetheless betrays key precepts of an ableist philosophy. His admonition to audiences about the dangerous lure hidden in technological prostheses results in a stereotypical equation of disabled populations, technological fetishism, and welfare state dependency.

One has to appreciate Virilio’s flamboyance; he exposes the extent to which postmodern liberation politics are premised upon disability panic. This logic reifies a normative lifestyle of the able bodied at the same time that it turns an “invalid” population into paradigmatic consumers of technology and accessibility. Clearly, a primary objective of an international disability rights movement—to expose the ableist ideology that underpins architecture and city planning—has put disability rights advocates at odds with cultural critics such as Virilio, who would invoke memories of nonartificial neighborhoods and terrorize audiences with comparisons between the involuntary “heavy metal” body of an “invalid” and the compensations afforded by high-tech prosthetic luxuries. In contrast, the disability community has been founded upon the understanding that ability serves public policy and philosophy alike as a historically and culturally variable term. It is through their common association with incapacity and aberrancy that people with enormously varied bodily experiences and capacities come to share a political and communal identity. Disability acts as a loose rubric and an amalgam of dissimilar physical and cognitive traits that often have little in common other than the social stigma of limitation, deviance, and inability.

Virilio’s staging of the problem enables us to contemplate the extent to which a disabled citizenry is central to social theory and postmodern philosophy. Over the past twenty years, even as disability rights advocacy has become more prominent, cultural critics have worked to demonstrate how the definitions of human “wholeness” and “integrity” are shifted by technological innovations. In this
way, and in a more benign and sweeping fashion, disability underwrites the cultural studies of technology writ large. Unlike Virilio, essayists on postmodern science and culture such as N. Katherine Hayles, Avital Ronell, and Donna Haraway deploy disabled bodies as proof of our fascination with “cyborglike” prosthetic enhancement. The apparatus of disability shows up in numerous postmodern catalogs without comment on the conflictual relationship of disabled people to the equipment that theoretically affords them access to able-bodied populations, architectural structures, and cultural commodities. Nor is there any serious effort to specify the nature of this usage within disabled communities themselves. As N. Katherine Hayles comments:

Already about 10% of the U.S. population are cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, prosthetic limbs, hearing aids, drug implants, and artificial joints. VR would substantially increase this percentage. If the extent to which one has become a cyborg is measured in terms of impact on psychic/sensory organization rather than difficulty detaching parts, VR users . . . are more thoroughly cyborgs than people with pacemakers.

Such a comparison inverts Virilio’s alarmist message by competitively squaring off the prosthetic agility and technological dependencies of disabled people against virtual reality buffs. In doing so, Hayles levels the cyborgian playing field in order to establish a more inclusive definition of the “prosthetically altered” body. While one may debate whether or not “difficulty [in] detaching parts” adequately describes the psychic/sensory impact of living one’s life on a respirator, with an artificial limb, or in a wheelchair, Hayles forgoes a discussion of disabled people’s more obvious status as “cyborgs” in order to privilege the chosen prosthetic identification of computer hackers and video junkies. Between Virilio and Hayles we have come full circle, from a discussion of the dangers of technological fetishism to an embrace of the titillating sensations of artificial augmentation. Yet, rarely do critics venture toward an elucidation of the experience of the population that underwrites either critical system.

All of these examples speak to the glaring omission of a disability studies perspective. Indeed, if one of the most common experiences of disabled people is that they are made to feel alone in their attempts to procure environmental access or to challenge the pathological narratives of their bodies presented in medicine and by the culture at large, disability scholars have experienced their own disciplinary and professional segregation and isolation. In response, this volume brings together essays by scholars seeking to understand the nature of such a critical and cultural elicitation by privileging disability as their own methodological objective. In the past few years we have witnessed the publication of works that either approach the question of disability from a humanities perspective or self-consciously announce themselves as proffering a disability studies perspective: Lennard Davis’s Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body, Arthur Frank’s The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics, Diane Price Herndl’s Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840–1940, David Hevey’s The Creatures That Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Image, Martin Norden’s The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Disability in the Movies, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature, and David Wills’s Prosthesis. The publication of these texts establishes that the study of disability helps to explain the complex contours of able-bodied persons’ mythologies about disability and also provides a field of inquiry within which to imagine a more humane constellation of stories about physical and cognitive difference.

The Private Subject of Disability

The discourse of disability has been largely defined by the genre of autobiography. Guided by the assumption that people with disabilities need to write their own stories in order to counteract the dehumanizing effects of societal representations and attitudes, these personal narratives usually offer the narrator as a disputatious figure critiquing the less than humane responses of a flat, often hostile, and uniformly able-ist culture. Such an impulse has inevitably invested its literary capital in personal narrative models that project the disabled subject as a lone figure against the uncomprehending universe of social discrimination and institutional disenfranchisement. As we follow the first person narrator through vignettes that illustrate the daily round of humiliations and insensitivities that comprise the lives of disabled people, the reader grows increasingly aware that inaccessibility involves more than the provision of ramps, curb cuts, and accessible public toilets (although the lack of these structural features literally prevents people with disabilities from engaging in meaningful participation in communities and institutions). The autobiographical narrator also provides a glimpse at a unique subjectivity that evolves out of the experience of disability as a physical, cognitive, and social phenomenon.

In one of the best known essays among disability studies scholars in the humanities, “On Being a Cripple,” Nancy Mairs formulates some of the curious paradoxes of physical incapacitation and being. For Mairs, disease and disorder serve up frustrating personal scenarios that must be creatively negotiated, and her inclination is to approach the question of life as a “cripple” from a private point of view that foregrounds the “hassles” of “being crippled.” Such a scrutiny of attitudes that comprise the interior life of the autobiographical subject of disability (she has multiple sclerosis) serves to direct attention to her own “peculiar history” of responses to physical “limitation.”
Because Mairs focuses upon the personal travails and negotiations that define living with a disability, the essay’s perspective strategically shifts attention away from institutional pathology and social attitudes toward the individual’s experience of disability. Hence, while Mairs goes on to assess the “discomforts” of parents, doctors, colleagues, and children, her analysis remains cloistered in the “less comfortable” arena of personal depression, “self loathing,” and debilitating paranoia. Mairs describes the private coordinates of bodily experience as a sporadic and unpredictable biological march into future deterioration. The value and appeal of her work hinge upon its no-nonsense approach to the traumas and ironies of a life that remains ambiguously tethered to the daily experience of pain and bodily breakdown. Her narrative style offers a shockingly intimate portrait of a disabled woman who unveils her most private thoughts and scathing self-critiques as a way of using disability to burrow down into the psychic and physical depths of human affairs.

Mairs’s approach dovetails with many contemporary attempts by autobiographers of disability to expand the array of options from which to imagine the lives of people with disabilities. The genre of “life stories” that has come to be synonymous with the literature of disability serves as an important gateway into the interior conflicts and psychology of disability. Such first person narratives provide readers with an alternative perspective on what it means to live with a disability in a culture obsessed with forging equations between physical ability, beauty, and productivity. Autobiographical narratives demand that the disabled subject develop a voice that privileges the agency of a bona fide perspective of disability. Given the presupposition that the “able-bodied” could never adequately dramatize the encounters between disability, personal experience, and “unaware” social policies, what motivates these stories is the pressing need for true-life verification that disability provides a specific and distinct perspective of its own.

The autobiographical narrative of disability tools disability as a private and “minority” concern, one that requires the attention of the culture because the social arena has proven inadequate to the task of responding—both legislatively and morally—to a population located on the fringes of institutional access. Nonetheless, first person narratives of disability have historically fed a public appetite for confessional writing that promises the revelation of personal catastrophes as the evidence of a more truthful access to secreted lives. The confessional mode places physical and cognitive limitation and difference on display to be consumed, and the mainstream parading of personal misfortune inevitably assures the reader/viewer of his or her comparative good fortunes or assuages a shared societal sense of guilt and insensitivity. Disability falls readily into conventional scenarios of triumph over tragedy or stories of saintly suffering where the afflicted fades away (physically and intellectually) into private martyrdom. As Lennard Davis points out, “by narrativizing an impairment, one tends to sentimentalize it, and link it to the bourgeois sensibility of individualism and the drama of an individual story.” The personal narrative expands the boundaries of our understanding of disability on an individual level, but its attendant social and political contexts tend to be overshadowed by the emotions of pity and/or sympathy evoked by the reader’s identification with the narrator’s personal plight. Consequently, first person narratives cannot singularly provide the interpretive paradigms needed to revise cultural understandings of disability.

While wide-ranging social critiques of disability are often downplayed or ignored in the public reception of autobiography, such recent histories of disability activism as those documented in Lennard Davis’s Enforcing Normalcy, David Hevey’s The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery, and Joseph P. Shapiro’s No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement contextualize disability as a socially constructed identity. The main thrust of these political treatises has been to reject the trite sentiments of mainstream representations of disabilities as “pitiful,” “leprous,” or “catastrophic” individual conditions. Critiques of social responses to disability have extended to such institutional fixtures as Jerry Lewis’s MDA telethon, the human genome project, Social Security regulations, welfare laws, mainstream movies, television “disease-of-the-week” portrayals, art photography, federal funding for the nursing home industry, and the “right-to-die” movement. These philosophical explorations endeavor to place the neglected moral, legislative, and social issues of disability at the center of an evolving national agenda.

While the reasons for the historical omission of disabled communities from prevailing social agendas have been construed from many vantage points and attributed to many causes, disabled writers and scholars of disability have consistently agreed on one point: the neglect of people with disabilities has resulted in their preeminence social invisibility. For instance, two groundbreaking anthologies published in the 1980s—Alan Garner and Tom Joe’s collection, Images of the Disabled/Disabling Images and Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch’s volume, Women with Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture, and Politics—argue in their introductions that disabled people can be most accurately defined as an ignored population in academic and public discourses of identity, civil rights, and representation. As with many minority populations who have sought to break down the barriers of racial, class, and gendered discrimination, disability studies scholars define their political program as an effort to redress the social “voicelessness” and institutional neglect of disabled people. This absence of models for comprehending the lives of people with disabilities has led to the articulation of two parallel problems: (1) disabled people have been portrayed inadequately in mainstream media presentations and have suffered from their historical invisibility in other representational arenas; and (2) in the wake of the passage of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act the new visibility of disabled
The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability outlines the coordinates of a disability studies approach in the humanities by interrogating a pervasive cultural and artistic dependency upon disability. All the essays in this volume have taken as a guiding principle that a disability studies approach to representations of disability will yield more than symptomatic, flat characterizations of disabled people. Analyses of disability in art, popular media, and history have much to teach us about the role of disability in culture than the assumption that lives defined as disabling (and hence unlivable or unworthy) go unrepresented and un(der)appreciated by audiences and cultures. This research inquires into the impact of representational discourses such as literature, film, television, and photography upon social perceptions of disability and the subjectivities of the disabled alike.

Characterizing Disability Studies

In part, investigating the impact of representational discourses upon perceptions of both disabilities and disabled communities involves the scrutiny of character types developed through the differentiating function of physical and psychological difference. Disability studies grapples with the metaphorical and symbolic values that disability has represented. Other than in autobiography, disability seldom has been explored as a condition or experience in its own right; instead disability's psychological and bodily variations have been used to metaphorize nearly every social conflict outside of its own ignoble predicament in culture. Consequently, the essays in this volume seek to forward an understanding of the discourses of disability in ways that are not strictly connected to elucidating the experience of disability itself. Each essay in this collection seeks to explore the historical, social, political, and metaphorical contours of disability in order to discern the manner and method of the category's symbolic deployment in art.

Of the collections currently available in disability studies, only Marsha Saxton and Florence Howe's edited volume, With Wings: An Anthology of Literature by and about Women with Disabilities, describes the significance of literature to questions of disability and representation. Saxton and Howe explain literature's applicability to questions of disability and disabled populations with a humanistic formula.

Literature is an important and effective tool for education and social change. Literature illuminates the details of daily living, the tiniest aspects of life experience, and at the same time the deepest meanings of this experience. Literature may point out social ills, while offering new possibilities; it communicates pain and transcends it. Literature speaks powerfully and profoundly, as well as subtly, delicately.49

Saxton and Howe provide a brief outline of a more positivistic program located in the promise of literature's commitment to the detailing of lives and experiences that artistic portraits often provide. The passage points to the authority that readers attribute to literary endeavor as a social instrument of change, for personal pain can sometimes prove a catalyst for the correction of social injustice. At the same time, the passage sidesteps the ways in which even the most revered literary texts embody the prejudices and debilitating attitudes of their own historical moments of production. This double-edged formulation makes literature both a utilitarian tool of transformation and a medium for further stigmatizing disability in the imaginations of its audience.

This volume seeks to demonstrate that disabled bodies and lives have historically served as the crutch upon which artistic discourses and cultural narratives have leaned to ensure the novelty of their subject matter. While these essays share a respect for art's often profound abilities to weave the intricate web of public lives and private negotiations of disability, each openly scrutinizes literature's often hazardous complicity in the "ideology of the physical." The ideology of the physical constructs an imagined bridge between bodily differences and individual abilities. Historically, the physical surface has existed as a medium that exposes the more abstract and intangible landscapes of psychology, morality, and spirituality. We use the terms physical and bodily here to designate any discernible-characteristic designated by a culture as definitively abnormal and tending toward the pathological. Thus, the ideology of the physical trades upon perceptions of functional disabilities such as missing or "stunted" appendages, mobility impairments, blindness, and deafness, as well as cosmetic distortions such as cleft pallets, facial tics, or the presence of an extra finger or toe. Yet, physical or bodily differences also include "nonmaterial" traits that mark one as disabled, such as the sound of a voice filtered through an electronic vocal cord stimulator or the cognitive impairments associated with the speech and thought patterns of people with traumatic head injuries or the "mentally defective." The bridge constructed by the ideology of the physical seeks to lure the reader/viewer into the mystery of whether discernible defects reveal the presence of an equally defective moral and civil character.

The most frequently cited literary example of this phenomenon occurs in Shakespeare's Richard III. Shakespeare's play mercilessly trades for its dramatic interest upon the villainous behavior of the hunchbacked Duke of Gloucester in his "unnatural" ascent to the throne. From the onset Richard's treachery appears to issue from the severity of his physical deformities. The protagonist, himself,
openly conspires with the audience in the ascription of his villainy to his misshapen figure.

[But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,  
Nor made to court an amorous looking glass;  
I that am rudely stamped and want love’s majesty  

And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover  
I am determined to prove a villain.]

Throughout the play, Richard soliloquizes upon the relationship between his illegitimate usurpation of the throne and his multiple physical deformities that mark him as "so lamely and unfashionable that dogs bark at me as I halt by them."51 His assassinations of friends, family members, and children display a vicious and essentialized brutality, while also garnering significance and dramatic interest for the political issue Richard makes of his own deformity. His motives issue from his exclusion, as a disabled man, from the "idle pleasures" of England in peacetime, but while he claims vengeance upon the world, witches, and "dissembling Nature" that brought him into the world "before [his] time" and "scarce half made up" (calling upon the sixteenth-century belief that maternal misdeeds bring about "defects" in their offspring),52 he faults those who would point out his moral defects, claiming that they discriminate against a "misshapen" man.

Richard's character openly engages the audience in a performance of the multiple and contradictory significations of a disabled body. His figure evidences all of the following attributes over the course of the play: a social burden; metaphysical sign of divine disfavor; evidence of the machinations of a divine plan in history; that a disabled child is retribution for parental weakness; that a disabled subject follows a deterministic trajectory in life; he is the bearer of an entrenched identity (pathetic or vengeful); he is the literal embodiment of the evidence of the fall of man; he personifies the fiendish specter of war; he is singular and exceptional rather than common and ordinary; he can be viewed as the most interior to a social order (the most human in suffering) or the most exiled (lacking in natural human affections); his physical excesses provide a ready source material for caricature. Finally, a scapegoat patterning to the play reiterates exile as a culturally sanctioned historical solution to the social disruption that disabled people are perceived to present. Shakespeare solidifies an array of perverse motivations while ventriloquizing these associations through Richard's perspective and thus, lends them the cast of factuality by placing them in the mouth of a disabled character. Overall, Richard III offers a cautionary tale in the formula of a double negative: do not distrust a natural correspondence between physical "imperfections" and villainy.53

Indeed, historical repetition has so naturalized the ideology of the physical that it has become a generic convention: even if it does not bear the markings of factuality and truth, it yields the pleasure of universal recognition. Al Pacino's recent restaging of the play as a documentary film, Looking for Richard, sets into motion (once again) the search for the meaning of the mystery that Richard's character embodies.54 The generational imperative to "pursue" the essence of such an elusive figuration brings Pacino back full circle to what every generation of critics before has already discovered: disability is motivation embodied. This tautological equation becomes the artistic holy grail itself, what begins as the most alien and inexplicable of life forms yields what is most commonplace and familiar. Generations of artists and critics willingly set out on this ritualized artistic travel narrative in search of the assurance that the mystery can be resolved, and in so doing we confirm that disability's physical and psychological disorder can be reconceived and domesticated from the safe distance of art's voyeuristic gaze.

Representational media secure our attention as readers and viewers in the double bind of our fascination/repulsion with physical difference. This titillating oscillation between binary sentiments develops out of the voyeuristic promise upon which poetry, plays, fiction, and films trade. Physical and cognitive differences mark lives as inscrutable and mysterious, and thus we approach these artistically embellished differences with a distanced curiosity that simulates intimacy while staving off the risk of an encounter. We experience disability through an anticipation of our desire to "know" the secret labyrinths of difference, with our fascination and repulsion also evolve out of an ability to leave the site of a narrative, while ventriloquizing these associations through Richard's perspective and thus, and the point is not whether the connection is forged or broken but rather that the two perpetually coexist and define each other. Readers' experience of the dual pleasures of fascination and repulsion also evolve out of an ability to leave the site of a fiction with our own membership in normalcy further consolidated and assured.

Consequently, the productive relationship between narrative discourses in the humanities and disability often proves to be a precarious one. As Dierdre Lynch explains in her study of eighteenth-century portraiture and caricature, the line between mimetic art and cartoonish satire is a fine one that disabled characters always threaten to collapse: "quantity undermines the positive claims of singularity by threatening inflation: more description and more detail may well define but they eventually disfigure. Added strokes, intended to flesh out a character, turn a portrait into a worthless lampoon or, worse, into something monstrous and unnameable."55 Is Shakespeare's portrait of Richard III a histor-
demonstrate that disability has served not only as a category of artistic and social fascination but as one of the instrumental devices of narrative production.

Paul Longmore’s foundational essay, “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures,” begins with a provocative question that clearly formulates this curious paradox: “Why do television and film so frequently screen disabled characters for us to see, and why do we usually screen them out of our consciousness even as we absorb them?” For Longmore, this question can be partially answered by an analysis of the ways in which visual media pursue a quick fix to the distressing moral and social issues involved in the representation of disability. Longmore and other disability scholars demonstrate that popular media narrate disability as an isolated phenomenon that is largely a matter of individual fortitude, will power, and perseverance, rather than delving into questions of social accommodation. According to Longmore, the visual media have traditionally used disability as a sop to our beleaguered cultural consciences by assuring the viewer that the problem is a largely isolated affair that needs to be treated one disorder at a time.

Here we come to the crux of the problem that Longmore introduces: narratives of disability have relied upon the production of physical and psychological difference in every historical epoch, yet this dependency has rarely led to a widespread understanding of disability as a communal identity. The consequences of the paradoxical relationship between a desire to parade disability on the screen and the simultaneous assurance to audiences that these isolated situations are being taken care of situates visual media in a unique position with respect to our understanding of disability. Disability acts as a shorthand method of securing emotional responses from audiences because pathos, pity, and abhorrence have proved to be an integral part of the historical baggage of our understandings of difference. Such a history of metaphorical opportunism sits at the heart of the profound ambivalence that disabled populations inevitably feel when faced with the ques-
tion of disability as a tool of artistic production. Literature, film, television, folklore, history, and philosophy (the primary discursive vectors in the humanities) straddle a critical divide that is not necessarily rehabilitative; instead they act as the textual space where physical limitations can be reworked as strengths, aberrancies can be deployed as compelling idiosyncracies, and villainous characters can be made comprehensible through psychic, sensory, and physical distortions. If disability has been summoned within the humanities to serve as a symbol of social conflict disability studies scrutinizes the nature and rationale of its symbolic manipulation within these discourses.

Studies of Disability in the Humanities

When one endeavors to locate vocabularies and disciplines about disability the options prove limited. For instance, medical interpretations of disability posit physical condition as a factual catalog of symptoms and diagnostic limitations that bind disability to a purely deterministic biological condition. One prominent historian of medicine and medical narratives, Ivan Illich, has characterized this objectifying process as the “degradation of intimate and meaning-endowing human experiences by transforming them into mere technical events.”

The taxonomic impulse of empirical discourses in the biological and social sciences proves only to literalize and obscure the intangibles of individual variation. To limit humanity to the factual record of a deterministic biological catalog ultimately proves as devastating as any tradition of metaphorical application and appropriation of disability.

While medicine certainly provides an empirical antithesis to the more ephemeral products of art, the historical and mythic meanings embedded in the scientific terminology of empiricism that constructs physical and cognitive disability usually lie unanalyzed and, therefore, uncomprehended. A host of studies conducted by historians of medical science in the humanities, such as Sander Gilman, Ruth Bleir, Emily Martin, Paula Treichler, and others, have proved invaluable to understanding the various motivations, pleasures, and professional interests that are at stake in the historical construction of disability.

In part, as many of the essays in this collection demonstrate, the pursuit of alternatives to pathological models of disability is a historical project. All of the essayists in The Body and Physical Difference seek to unearth and understand the varied attitudes that have characterized disability across history and cultures. Since we arrive in our own historical moment replete with an awareness of disability’s malignant repertoire, one is tempted to assume that disability has always played host to a similar array of deforming and malignant associations. Yet, while this has been the case during many historical periods (particularly near the end of centuries when millennial scenarios of future utopias and cultural collapse loom large), one cannot generalize about the social meanings of

Perhaps this production of truth, . . . multiplied, intensified, and even created its own intrinsic pleasures. We have at least invented a different kind of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open—the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure.

Although Foucault’s territory in this excerpt is the domain of the nineteenth-century prototype of contemporary sexologists, his expose proves instructive for disability studies and the critique of diagnostic discourses. Rather than refuting the diagnosis itself—and thus in turn calling attention to the enunciation of its titillating bodily contours and physical prognoses—Foucault turns the medical gaze back upon itself. In doing so, he exposes a pleasure at the heart of professional activity that results in the will to produce a pathological subject of diagnosis.

Disability studies inevitably emphasizes a similar methodological objective. The essays in this collection attempt to return the products of a medicalized gaze—in history, science, art, and electronic media—back upon the source. Disability studies does not refuse or repress the uncertainties and limitations of biological conditions, but rather it exposes the pleasurable investments undergirding discourses that reproduce, expand, and tediously detail taxonomic catalogs of disability’s pathological trajectories. What is the professional titillation that accompanies the exotic land of dysfunction and biological breakdown? How is the attempt to contain and control the chaotic text of disability integral to modern science’s ability to manufacture itself as normalizing and authoritative? How have disabled populations been used to solidify and secure definitions of the altruistic service and moral commitments of diagnostic disciplines? Following some of the key tenets of Foucaultian theory, disability studies scholars endeavor to analyze the self-serving values and advantages of disability’s circulation within all disciplines and cultural discourses. Collectively, scholars of disability seek to understand the various motivations, pleasures, and professional interests that are at stake in the historical construction of disability.
disability across historical epochs or cultures. For instance, Martha L. Edwards's essay, "Constructions of Physical Disability in the Ancient Greek World: The Community Concept," analyzes the ways in which the Greek aesthetic of ideal bodily forms did not automatically lead to the parallel stigmatization of disability as a corruption of that utopic and artistic impulse. Using a methodology that she terms a "community model of disability" that defines physicality as a culturally constructed phenomenon, Edwards argues that the category of disability was largely an absent term in Greek vocabularies. This absence for Edwards suggests that having a disability did not result in one's ostracism from significant cultural activities. Felicity Nussbaum's reading of Sarah Scott's novel, Millennium Hall, identifies a narrative of an eighteenth-century utopian women's community that privileges physical "monstrosity" as one criterion of membership. Capitalizing upon disabled women's expulsion from heterosexual and patriarchal rituals of courtship, maternity, and domesticity, Scott presents an alternative female society that functions "as a harmonious community of reason, reflection, and freedom to speak that is unattainable outside of its confines." These alternative historical moments identified by Edwards and Nussbaum proffer a glimpse into the historical variables of disability's representation.

In discussions of the ways in which disability has been historically represented in literature and history, disability studies scholars have also begun to identify a working catalog of disability's cultural meanings. Such a catalog reflects ablest projections onto disability, and consequently, a compilation of these restrictive narrative possibilities reveals the method by which disability has been colonized in rhetoric and metaphor. Martin S. Pernick's essay, "Defining the Defective: Eugenics, Aesthetics, and Mass Culture in Early Twentieth-Century America," explores the enactment of physical violence upon babies designated as malformed and unfit to carry on viable lives. Through a discussion of the film, The Black Stork, that fictionalized the "heroic" program of euthanasia against disabled infants pursued by Chicago surgeon Harry Haiselden, Pernick argues that an aesthetics of normalcy inevitably rationalizes extraordinary campaigns of professionally sanctioned genocide against disabled populations. This further demonstrates the idea of "the disabled" or "nonviable" itself to be reliant upon historically variable values—as opposed to medical—precepts.

For Lennard Davis this connection between physical aesthetics and disability is demonstrated as fictional by the art history critic who imaginatively "re-members" the fragmented statue of the Venus de Milo into an object of aesthetic pleasure and illusory wholeness. Using Lacan and Freud, Davis demonstrates that the psyche continuously attempts to re-member its own conception of the body as whole and nonfragmented even though this ideal of wholeness is necessarily false. Elizabeth C. Hamilton's essay, "From Social Welfare to Civil Rights: The Representation of Disability in Twentieth-Century German Literature," explores the relationship between representations of disability and genocidal histories in twentieth-century Germany. Using as a starting point the Nazi death camps that killed between 100,000 and 125,000 German citizens with disabilities during World War II, Hamilton analyzes how postwar social policies and literature ironically perpetuate the devaluation of disabled communities. Hamilton's essay concludes with a consideration of novelist Gunter Grass's symbolic treatment of disability as an allegory of a disabling German nationalism and concludes with a consideration of disabled German autobiographers such as Andrea Buch and Sigride Arnade who challenge this ambivalent representational heritage. For Hamilton, first person narrations of disability provide important counterpoints to the symbolic impulses of fiction that, in metaphorizing disability, overlook the individual and political struggles of disabled populations. In each of these cases, disability studies scholars endeavor to reflect the pathological impositions and moral investments in disability back upon cultural ideologies of able bodiedness.

The most common methodological approach to the question of disability in the humanities is the analysis of cognitive and physical differences that symbolize other social conditions. Stigmatized social positions founded upon gender, class, nationality, and race have often relied upon disability to visually underscore the devaluation of marginal communities. The essayists in this volume demonstrate that while disability is often used as the physical evidence of "damaged" populations, it also serves storytellers for its transgressive and subversive potential. For instance, narrative explorations of feminine subjugation within patriarchy often find a metaphorical alliance in the female protagonist's disabling condition. Cindy LaCom's essay, "'It Is More Than Lame': Female Disability, Sexuality, and the Maternal in the Nineteenth-Century Novel," examines the pervasive use of the female invalid to comment upon Victorian ideas of sexuality, domesticity, and feminine authority. Analyzing the works of canonical authors such as Anthony Trollope, as well as lesser known women writers such as Charlotte Yonge, LaCom argues that disability was closely connected with metaphors of seduction and desire throughout the nineteenth century. While the melodramatic prototype of the female invalid most often represented the asexual monster of patriarchal imaginations, she also represented the alternative power of a repressed feminine sexuality. In Caroline Molina's analysis of Jane Campion's contemporary feminist allegory, The Piano, Ada's muteness provides the symbolic material of "the universal problematic of linguistic interpretation, of speaking and understanding the 'Other.'" By using both Ada's self-willed silence and her later mutilation at the hands of her husband as a symbol of the historical voicelessness of women, Molina demonstrates that the film "aesthetisizes and eroticizes the disabled woman in unprecedented ways." Such a strategy places Campion's use of her mute heroine as an important innovation in the female romance genre.

While disability in narratives of gender serves as a useful metaphor for feminine alterity, stories that privilege class concerns tend to position disability as a
synechdoche for the collapse of aristocracies or the amelioration of middle class anxieties. In “The ‘Talking Cure’ (Again): Gossip and the Paralyzed Patriarchy," Jan Gordon argues that British literature has traditionally portrayed disability within the aristocracy as a defect of the head and heart. Such an emphasis upon disability as a dis-ease of the psychological realm provides literature with a textual syndrome that can be successfully “treated” and often cured with the salve of conversation. Within this tradition that includes classical British works such as Lady Chatterley’s Lover, Middlemarch, The Expedition of Humphry Clinker, Bleak House, and Waverley, supposedly class-bound disorders such as gout, impotence, and paralysis have exemplified the collapse of aristocratic lines and the lethality of pure bloodlines. Paul K. Longmore also examines class and disability in his essay, “Conspicuous Contribution and American Cultural Dilemmas: Telethon Rituals of Cleansing and Renewal.” Longmore documents a history of the U.S. telethon industry in terms of its appeals to middle class notions of civic and moral duty. The promotion of charity networks such as the Muscular Dystrophy Association, Easter Seals, and the United Cerebral Palsy Association in the name of “catastrophic” biological disorders seeks to assuage a perennially beleaguered sense of economic greed and abundance. Such suspicions of capitalist corruption present a portrait of a historical U.S. conflict wherein material acquisition must be offset by ritualized acts of “conspicuous charitable contribution.” In the midst of this moral and economic exchange the disabled child as tragic innocent is transformed into the recipient of American beneficence.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s essay, “Disabled Women as Powerful Women in Petry, Morrison, and Lorde: Revising Black Female Subjectivity,” demonstrates a historical alliance between disability and racialized femininity. Using the work of Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, and Audre Lorde, Thomson examines the ways in which the dual marginalization of being black and female conspires to undermine African American women’s sense of autonomy and self-worth. An analysis of disabled black women characters reveals that traditionally stigmatized markers such as race, gender, and disability are transformed into a powerful elaboration of a transgressive social identity. Rather than succumbing to the denigrating projections of an able-ist and racist culture, these writers all describe the “aberrantly embodied” black woman as one who “both embodies and transcends her subjugated identities by claiming corporeal difference as exceptionality rather than inferiority.” Thomson demonstrates that this relationship between race and disability will be a fertile area of analysis for disability studies.

In addition to these metaphorical alliances with gender, class, and race, disability can also serve to symbolize and expose the workings of nationalist ideologies. Because cultures often base their sense of morality upon the “humane” treatment of disabled citizens, national identity—particularly during wartime—is often closely tied to attitudes about war wounds that result in physical infirmity and bodily loss. In “Disfigurement and Reconstruction in Oliver Wendell Holmes’s ‘The Human Wheel, Its Spokes and Felloes’” David D. Yuan argues that the development of a modernized prosthetics industry in the postbellum United States was explicitly linked to the Republic’s hopes for a reintegrated nation. The invention of the Palmer leg signaled the possibility of a modern prosthesis that could make the “unsightliness” of Civil War amputees less obtrusive to the class protocols and fragile sensibilities of the Victorian era. In doing so, Yuan explores the ways in which the war amputee threatened a traditional myth of American innocence that was artificially restored by the slant of hand that prosthetics promises. David A. Gerber’s essay, “In Search of Al Schmid: War Hero, Blinded Veteran, Everyman,” details the ways in which a veteran’s blinding acts as the symbolic material for patriotic resuscitation. Moving between the politicized agendas of the marines, the U.S. government, “communist” Hollywood, and the Blind Veterans Association, Gerber documents the ways in which Al Schmid’s blindness was mobilized to serve various national ideologies. Like Yuan, Gerber contemplates the ways in which narratives of disability prove integral to quintessentially American mythologies of masculinity, racial supremacy, and manifest destiny. Both essays provide a pivotal understanding of the centrality of disability to definitions of nation, nationalism, and national identity. In addition, Gerber documents the ways in which disabled individuals’ lives are both subjected to and exceed the limits of the state institutions that ensnare them.

Implicitly, all the essays in the volume explore how disabled subjectivities are constituted in a struggle with the able-bodied public’s projections and investments in maintaining disability as alterity. Finally, disability studies methodologies also involve the identification of artistic models that provide dimension to our ideas of disabled subjectivities. Such projects privilege works that delineate the unique and even perverse psychic lives of people with disabilities as they refract and reflect the myriad ideologies that compose the conflictual subject of disability. Maria Frawley looks at Harriet Martineau’s delineation of a subjectivity of the invalid in her essay, “‘A Prisoner to the Couch’: Harriet Martineau, Invalidism, and Self-Representation.” Frawley argues that Martineau, in order to critique the objectifying principles of medicine, inverts the socially isolated space of the “sickroom” into its own philosophical vantage point. By unseating conventional associations of physical ability with insight and interpretive control, Frawley argues that Martineau invites readers to see the world through the eyes of the “invalid” rather than adopting the traditionally medicalized gaze that turns the bedridden into an object of investigation and horror. The result is Martineau’s development of an alternative ideology of “healthy illness” that threatens to “unravel traditional binary pairings such as those of sickness and health, mind and body, and reason and emotion.” In “Making up the Stories as We Go
Along: Men, Women, and Narratives of Disability,” Madame Miner analyzes the influence of gender upon the narrative structure of contemporary stories of “physical catastrophe.” In order to demonstrate the ways gender expectations influence the narration of disability narratives, Miner contrasts Andre Dubus’s sense of the irretrievable loss of masculine agency with Nancy Mair’s creation of a newfound sexual identity that evades more traditional sexual objectifications of women’s bodies. Miner’s work foregrounds the multiple social identities that necessarily inform any theorization of a disabled subjectivity. These affiliations, as Elizabeth Hamilton’s research into disability autobiography also demonstrates, often override the disabled subject’s sense of sharing a common experience with other disabled people. By researching disability as narrative, Miner and Frawley both examine how disabled subjectivities must be understood as multiply inflected across gender, class, and racial lines.

Collectively these essays afford a more expansive and complex understanding of the cultural and artistic tropes and types that have come to dominate our ideas of disability as a social narrative. Each essay highlights the socially freighted meanings, mythologies, and stereotypes that have accrued around disabled persons and communities. Through careful interrogations of the historical nature of definitions such as limitation, incapacity, monstrosity, physicality, humanity, and being itself, disability studies scholars seek to expose the symbolic investments that produce and reproduce disabled communities as inherently inferior and parasitic. In the face of pervasive ableist ideologies of bodily norms, the theorization of disability as a socially constructed condition will continue to the body and bodily limitation.

NOTES


2. Disability studies is a relatively recent rubric that seeks to group research that focuses upon the historical, political, social, and professional meanings ascribed to disability and disabled populations. As this introduction will go on to demonstrate, the study of disability has been largely relegated to the empirical sciences that seek to categorize and catalog disorders and impairments in order to further consolidate definitions of normative physiology. Disability studies takes the medicalized model of disability as its primary object of critique. In this volume we seek to introduce this critical rubric into the humanities by collecting essays that comment upon the centrality of disability in history, literature, film, and the arts.

3. This particular critique of disability as central to the rationale and justification for the necessity of numerous professions comes by way of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, the very viability of professions is secretly maintained by the ceaseless production of aberrancy that in turn provides a perennial object of investigation in need of treatment. In *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1978; reprint, New York: Random House, 1990), for instance, Foucault designates the disciplinary expose of sexual abnormality and deviance as an addictive professional pleasure that both ensures the longevity of the profession itself and assures the insertion of patients within a determinant catalog of perversions. Disability studies critiques a similar history of professional parasitism. Disabled communities traditionally have been defined through scientific narratives about aberrancies and physiological dysfunctions that in turn further sustain the need for the professional discourses that define them.

4. All of the previously mentioned social identities have developed critiques of empirical objectivity through the humanities. By arguing that heterosexist, racist, masculinist, and class-bound ideologies undergird our notions of normative cultural ideals, criticism in the humanities has effectively politicized our understanding of the inherently biased nature of all information while arguing that professional neutrality represses structuring social differences. In this way disability has taken a decidedly different direction from other identity discourses due to its omnipresence in the empirical sciences, and yet it still suffers from the lack of a voice within those very disciplines.

5. One recent foray into the prevalence of disability imagery is Martin Norden’s *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994). Norden chronicles the use of disability from the earliest moments of silent film to the recent fascination with disability stories in the 1980s. Norden hypothesizes that disability has been characterized most typically as an experience of isolation where the disabled character is depicted as existing outside of all social and communal circuits.

6. Although there is much debate within the disability community over appropriate terminology, we use the following designations interchangeably throughout our introduction: “disabled people,” “disabled populations,” “people with disabilities,” “disabled constituencies,” and so forth. While many have argued that using disability as a modifying adjective (as in “disabled people”) dangerously usurps the personhood of the specified individual or population, our position is that disability acts as a structuring feature through which one is interpellated into an identity (whether that identity is chosen or not). See, for instance, the comments of Harlan Hahn (professor of political science) and Mary Duffy (visual and performance artist) on this question in the documentary *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back*, dir. Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, 48 min., Brace Yourselves Productions, 1996, videocassette.


lived, the body is marked, inscribed, and made meaningful in relation to the culturally specific forms of intersubjectivity and language. The identity it acquires in this process is a gendered one, inscribed on the biological raw materials" (15). All of these outgrowths of our current ideas regarding the absolute constructed nature of the body can be related to Jean-Luc Nancy's influential proposition that the body lacks any tangible essence in his essay "Corpus," in Re-Thinking Technologies, ed. Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): "There is no whole, no totality of the body—its absolute separation and sharing out. There is no such thing as the body. There is no body" (31).

12. Ibid., 5.
14. Ibid.
15. Even in the editors' examples of cultures that more naturally include people with disabilities, such integration occurs only on the heels of an exceptional story that attempts to linguistically accommodate a group that exists outside of a normative definition of physicality. Their examples of more positive understandings of disability include the disabled child who is "a gift from God" or the heightened capacities of one sensory organ that develops to help overcome the absence or limitations of another. These mythologies of "exceptional" inclusion have long been the target of disability scholars seeking to debunk malignant and romanticized narratives ascribed to people with disabilities.
16. Even in the Whyte and Whyte introduction with its emphasis upon cultural variability in the international approach to disability there is a nagging criterion of humanity that people with disabilities must struggle to achieve in most cultures. See their discussion of "personhood" and "humanity" in Barbados, North America, and European countries on pages 10–12.
17. Current theories of the body share a penchant for unveiling a mapping of gendered, racialized, classed, and sexed coordinates onto bodies. Efforts to be inclusive of the range of ideological meanings ascribed to bodies inevitably reveal important limitations when it comes to disability. The very proliferation of politicized identities that attach to our notion of the body as a construct reveals a neglect of disabled bodies as a crucial nexus of physical experience. For instance, Elizabeth Grosz explains it in this way: "The specificity of bodies must be understood in their historical rather than simply their biological concreteness. Indeed, there is no body as such: there are only bodies—male or female, black, brown, white, large or small—and the gradations in between." Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 19. In The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity (New York: Routledge, 1994), Mary Russo articulates a connection between feminine bodies and images of degraded materiality: "The word [grotesque] itself, as almost every writer on the topic feels obliged to mention sooner or later, evokes the cave—the grotto-esque. Low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, imminently visceral. As bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like (and in the most gross metaphorical sense be identified with) the cavernous anatomical female body" (1). In Robyn Wiegman's introduction to her collection American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), she says that "[i]n this sense, the economies of visibility that produce the network of meanings attached to bodies (their specific race, gender, ethnic, sexual and national demarcations) are more than political in hierarchical practices: they are indelibly subjective ones as well" (4). Even in books on the body and medicine, as in Paul Komesaroff's "Introduction: Postmodern Medical Ethics," in Troubled Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Postmodernism, Medical Ethics, and the Body, ed. Paul A. Komesaroff (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), we witness the same tendency to ascribe a limited series of social meanings to corporeal states: "As it is
Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), Paul Virilio points out that the demands of the disabled community that threaten to pull us all into an artificial world of social (non)interaction can be understood as a crisis of the human versus nonhuman binary that informs much of the criticism of technology. David Wills's Prosthesis (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995) points out that the alignment of disability with fears of the inhuman highlights a perennial conflict that informs the utilization of language itself. Since language is always burdened with the task of passing off an artificial re-presentation of events as natural and "in process," the act of speaking or writing is one best characterized by the idea of prosthesis (the substitution of the artificial for the natural): "In this way the wooden leg represents the duality of every prosthesis, its search for a way between emulating the human and superceding the human... But what are demonstrated in the leg's simultaneous advances towards the human and the nonhuman are two competing conceptions of mechanical operations, one based on analogy with the human model and that opts for the difference of the digital, a digital reduced, however, to a binary. But they are also two competing models of the human, of difference, of conceptualization itself. For they continue to compete throughout the development of high technology into the domain of the robotic operations and into the question of artificial intelligence, and it is hard to know where the force of analogy has ever abandoned the field in favor of something that might be called the purely mechanical, or the electronic." 27. The critical formulation that would expose Virilio's philosophy as an artificial construct here is that Wills perceives a historical continuity that persists into the electronic age. Since Virilio sees disabled people as "robotic" in their technologized existences and thus more closely aligned with the "nonhuman," they serve as emblematic of this postmodern terror. 30. Paul Virilio, "The Third Interval: A Critical Transition," in Re-Thinking Technologies, ed. Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 11.

31. Ibid., 11-12.

32. One irony of such an association of disabled people with technological prosthesis is that nearly 70 percent of the disabled population lives below the poverty line. Consequently, disabled people are often prevented from gaining access to necessary equipment that can facilitate their access to able-bodied cultures and institutions. This fact alone demonstrates the depths of insensitivity that inform the politicized use of disability employed by Virilio and other philosophers of technology.

33. Though we go on to explore N. Katherine Hayles's use of disabled populations, Avital Ronell's The Telephone Book (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) and Donna Haraway's Simians, Cyborgs, and Women (New York: Routledge, 1991) both use disability as a means by which to establish the arrival of a modern era founded upon technological prosthesis. Ronell develops her theories around readings of Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone to communicate with his deaf wife. In doing so, she theorizes that the nineteenth-century freak show serves as the repressed term in scientific and medical discourses that would seek to ameliorate suffering, isolation, and monstrosity by containing physical and cognitive difference within the diagnostic categories of empiricism.

Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women (New York: Routledge, 1991) provides another example of disability's unremarked-upon centrality to definitions of contemporary culture. Haraway valorizes "monsters" and other "boundary creatures" as exemplary of high-tech subjectivities that undermine old world dualisms but footnotes the disabled in order to demonstrate some patriarchal ironies of high-tech culture: military tech "tames" technological research by advertising its application for disabled users. Her point is that disabled people are supplemented with technology only in order to re-humanize patriarchal culture. Haraway then delights in the postmodern point that a "perverse" aspect of technology involves its way of "[m]aking the always context-relative social definitions of 'ableness' particularly clear, and military high-tech has a way of making human beings disabled by definition, a perverse aspect of much automated battlefield and Star Wars R & D" (248). In this way, disabled people exemplify, in a footnote, the self-evident cyborgs of modernity—transhuman subjects who rework the nature/culture divide.

34. Note the difference between these representations of disability and the recent work of journalist John Hockenberry. In Moving Violations (New York: Harper and Row, 1994), Hockenberry analyzes his relationship as a disabled person to his journalistic subjects. Such a relationship is a complex one for it involves a negotiation of his disability from a variety of perspectives. For instance, in one of the opening chapters, "Walking with the Kurds," Hockenberry discusses his trek on horseback across the mountains separating Iraq and Turkey. In such a landscape his wheelchair is of no use to him, yet riding horseback allows him a sense of mobility that he rarely experiences back in the States. Also, Hockenberry speculates throughout the work about the ways in which his disability often allows him a form of intimacy with his subjects that nondisabled journalists do not necessarily enjoy. Such an irony exposes one way in which disability can prove to be an advantage as well as an obstacle in the pursuit of professional objectives.


45. Ibid.
46. While David Hevey's book, *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (New York: Routledge, 1992), is not exclusively devoted to a history of disability activism, chapters 4 and 6 attend specifically to the struggle of politicized disabled constituencies. Underpinning the entire book is an argument about a historical movement to bring a disability perspective into circulation in various social arenas.


48. The majority of studies on disability outside of medical discourses begin by reiterating that people with disabilities can best be described as suffering from cultural invisibility. Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch begin their introduction to *Women with Disabilities* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988) by stating: “Despite the prevalence of disability in this society, disabled persons tend to be invisible” (1). In *Images of the Disabled/Disabling Images* (New York: Prager Publishers, 1987), Alan Garner and Tom Joe make a parallel point about the relative absence of images of disability in mainstream media: “They [the image makers] include literature and the movies; telethons with their infantilized portrayal of the disabled, and the news presentations; the print media, which like the TV news, rarely include the disabled and then most often as a human interest feature—not news” (3). This volume (and disability studies in general) adopts a position more akin to that made by David Hevey in *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (New York: Routledge, 1992): “Disabled people have had more images launched in their name than Helen ever had ships” (7).


51. Ibid., 5.

52. Marie-Helene Huet has most recently traced out the historical lineage of the relationship between women's maternal imaginations and monstrous offspring in *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

53. The play's enduring reputation as Shakespearean drama with mass appeal has also mitigated against its cultural value amongst commentators and critics. Many trace out the egregiousness of Shakespeare's reiteration of a Tudor myth of Gloucester's deformity—one that was culled from Sir Thomas More's account, kept alive by Hollinshed, and is traceable to an orignary source in Bishop Ely who, historians suggest, *invented* the deformity of the king as a stratagem for deriding the wholesale malignity of the previous regime. Members of the Richard III society point to Richard's hump, withered arm, and limp as indicative of Shakespeare's distortion of historical reality: “In reality, Richard was quite normal looking . . . [he] was known as an accomplished solider. He would not have been able to fight on horseback with heavy armor and weapons if he were Shakespeare's hunchback with a withered arm” (Richard III Society Web-Page http://www.webcom.com/blanchrd/index.html). These efforts at rescuing the historical Richard from the slander of physical deformity were begun as early as the mid-eightheenth century by Horace Walpole. The restoration of Richard's physical form in an effort at historical accuracy, however, leaves intact a more resonant equation at the root of cultural mythologies of disability—that between external shape and internal disposition.


58. Ibid., 307.


62. One of the most sweeping analyses of the genocidal tendencies of cultures nearing the millennium is Richard Powers's *Operation Wandering Soul* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1993). Powers uses disabled children in a Los Angeles children's ward as the springboard into his history of myths that turn upon the apocalyptic sacrifice of "innocent" and "flawed" populations.