Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature

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1997

Columbia University Press • New York

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Disability, Identity, and Representation: An Introduction

In its broadest sense, this book investigates how representation attaches meanings to bodies. Although much recent scholarship explores how difference and identity operate in sociopolitical constructions as gender, race, and sexuality, cultural and literary criticism has generally overlooked the related perceptions of corporal otherness we think of variously as "monstrosity," "mutation," "deformation," "crippledness," or "physical disability." Yet the physically extraordinary figure is essential to the cultural project of American self-making as the varied throng of gendered, racial, ethnic, and sexual figures of otherness that support the privileged norm. My purpose here is to alter the term and expand our understanding of the cultural construction of bodies and identity by reframing "disability" as another cultural bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. In other words, I intend to introduce such figures as the cripple, the invalid, and the freak into the critical conversations we devote to deconstructing figures like the mulatto, the primitive, the queer, and the lady. To denaturalize the cultural coding of these extraordinary bodies, I go beyond assailing stereotypes to interrogate the conventions of representation and unravel the complexities of identity production within social narratives of bodily differences. In accordance with postmodernism's premise that the margin constitutes the center, I probe the periphery so as to view the
whole in a fresh way. By scrutinizing the disabled figure as the paradigm of what culture calls deviant, I hope to expose the assumptions that support seemingly neutral notions of disability operations in culture and on how the discourses of disability, race, gender, and sexuality intermingle to create figuring of others from the raw material of bodily variance, specifically at sites of representation such as the freak show, sentimental fiction, and black women's literary novels. Such an analysis furthers our collective understanding of the complex processes by which all forms of corporeal diversity acquire the cultural meanings underlying a hierarchy of bodily traits that determines the distribution of privilege, status, and power.

One of this book's major aims is to challenge entrenched assumptions that "able-bodiedness" and its conceptual opposite, "disability," are self-evident physical conditions. My intention is to defamiliarize these identity categories by disclosing how the "physically disabled" are produced by way of legal, medical, political, cultural, and literary narratives that comprise an exclusionary discourse. Constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deficiency, the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control, and identity. In other words, I want to move disability from the realm of medicine into that of political minorities, to recast it from a form of pathology to a form of ethnicity. By asserting that disability is a residue of bodily particularities in the contest of social power relations, I intend to counter the social images of physical disability as an absolute, inferior state and a personal misfortune. Instead, I show that disability is a representation, a cultural interpretation of physical transformation or configuration, and a comparison of bodies that structures social relations and institutions. Disability, then, is the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do.

This socially constructed very evident is evident, for example, in the current legal definition of disability established by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. This landmark civil rights legislation acknowledges that disability depends upon perception and subjective judgment rather than on objective bodily states: after identifying disability as an "impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities," the law conceives that being legally disabled is also a matter of "being regarded as having such an impairment." Essential but implicit to this definition is that both "impairment" and "limits" depend on the subjective experiences of bodies with untested but determining norms, a hypothetical set of guidelines for corporeal form and function arising from cultural expectations about how human beings should look and act. Although these expectations are partly founded on physiological facts about typical humans—such as having two legs with which to walk upright or having some capacity for sight or speech—their sociopolitical meanings and consequences are entirely culturally determined. Stairs, for example, create a functional impairment for wheelchair users that ramps do not. Printed information accommodates the sighted but "limits" blind persons. Deafness is not a disabling condition in a community that communicates by signing as well as speaking. People who cannot lift three hundred pounds are "able-bodied," whereas those who cannot lift fifty pounds are "disabled." Moreover, such culturally generated and perpetuated standards as "beauty," "independence," "fitness," "competence," and "normalcy" exclude and disable many human bodies while validating and affirming others. Even though the law attempts to define disability in terms of function, the meanings attached to physical form and appearance constitute "limits" for many people—as evidenced, for example, by "ugly laws," some repealed as recently as 1974, that restricted visibly disabled people from public places. Thus, the ways that bodies interact with the socially engineered environment and conform to social expectations determine the varying degrees of disability or "able-bodiedness," of extra-ordinaryness or ordinariness.

Consequently, the meanings attributed to extraordinary bodies reside not in inherent physical flaws, but in social relationships in which one group is legitimated by portraying valued physical characteristics and maintains its ascendency and its self-identity by systematically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others. Representation thus simultaneously buttresses an embodied version of normative identity and shapes a narrative of corporeal difference that excludes those whose bodies or behaviors do not conform. So by focusing on how representation creates the physically disabled figure in American culture, I will also clarify the corresponding figure of the normative American self so powerfully etched into our collective cultural consciousness. We will see that the disabled figure operates as the vividly embodied, stigmatized other whose social role is to symbolically free the privileged, idealized figure of the American self from the vagaries and vulnerabilities of embodiment.

One purpose of this book, then, is to probe the relations among social identities—valued and devalued—outlined by our accepted hierarchies of embodiment. Corporeal departures from dominant expectations never go uninterpreted or unpunished, and conformities are almost always rewarded. The narrative of deviance surrounding bodies considered different is paralleled by a narrative of universality surrounding bodies that correspond to notions of the ordinary or the superlative. Cultural dichotomies do their evaluative work: this
body is inferior and that one is superior; this one is beautiful and perfect and that one is grotesque or ugly. In this economy of visual difference, those bod-
ies deemed inferior become spectacles of otherness while the unmarked are
sheltered in the neutral space of normality. Invested with meanings that far
outstrip their biological bases, figures such as the cripple, the quadroon, the
quer, the outsider, whose are taxonomical, ideological products marked by
socially determined stigma, defined through representation, and excluded
from social power and status. Thus, the cultural other and the cultural self op-
erate together as opposing twin figures that legitimate a system of social, eco-
nomic, and political empowerment justified by physiological differences.

As I examine the disabled figure, I will also trouble the mutually constitu-
ing figure this study coins: the normate. This neologism names the veiled sub-
ject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others
whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries. The term normate
usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent
themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed
identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural cap-
tal they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants
them. If one attempts to define the normate position by peeling away all the
marked traits within the social order at this historical moment, what emerges
is a very narrowly defined profile that describes only a minority of actual peo-
ple. Irving Goffman, whose work I discuss in greater detail later, observes the
logical conclusion of this phenomenon by noting wryly that there is "only one
complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, north-
ern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of
good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports." Interest-
ingly, Goffman takes for granted that feminality has no part in his sketch of a
normative human being. Yet this image's ubiquity, power, and value resonate
clearly. One testimony to the power of the normate subject position is that
people often try to fit its description in the same way that Cinderella's step-sis-
ters attempted to squeeze their feet into her glass slipper. Naming the figure
of the normate is one conceptual strategy that will allow us to press our analy-
ses beyond the simple dichotomies of male/female, white/black, straight/gay,
or able-bodied/disabled so that we can examine the subtle intersections
among social identities that are anchored to physical differences.

The normate subject position emerges, however, only when we scrutinize
the social processes and discourses that constitute physical and cultural oth-
erness. Because figures of otherness are highly marked in power relations,
even as they are marginalized, their cultural visibility as deviant obscures and
neutralizes the normative figure that they legitimate. To analyze the operation
of disability, it is essential then to theorize at length—an I do in part 1—about
the processes and assumptions that produce both the normate and its discor-
dant companion figures. However, I also want to complicate any simple di-
chotomy of self and other, normate and deviant, by centering part 2 of the
book on how representations sometimes deploy disabled figures in complex,
triangulated relationships or surprising alliances, and on how these represen-
tations can be both oppressive and liberating. In part 2, my examination of the
way disability is constituted by the freak show, sentimental fiction, and black
women's liberatory novels focuses on female figures for two reasons: first, be-
cause the links between disability and gender otherness need investigating,
and second, because the non-normate status accorded disability feminizes
all disabled figures. What I uncover by closely analyzing these sites of repre-
sentation suggests that disability functions as a multifaceted trope, though it
remains the mark of otherness. Although centering on disabled figures illumi-
nates the processes that sort and rank physical differences into normal and
abnormal, at the same time, these investigations suggest the possibility of po-
tentially positive, complicating interpretations. In short, by examining disabled
by a reading of the body that is infected by race, ethnicity, and gender, I
hope to reveal possibilities for signification that go beyond a monologic inter-
pretation of corporeal difference as deviance. Thus, by first theorizing disabili-
y as a reading of the body that is infected by race, ethnicity, and gender, I
the Disabled Figure in Literature
The discursive construct of the disabled figure, informed more by received at-
titudes than by people's actual experience of disability, circulates in culture
and feeds a home within the conventions and codes of literary representation.
As Paul Robinson notes, "the disabled, like all minorities, have . . . existed not
as subjects of art, but merely as its occasions." Disabled literary characters
usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic
aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, elicitng responses
from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disabil-
ity's cultural resonance. Indeed, main characters almost never have physical
disabilities. Even though mainstream critics have long discussed, for example,
the implications of Twain's Jim for blacks, when literary critics look at disabled
characters, they often interpret them metaphorically or aesthetically, reading
them without political awareness as conventional elements of the sentiment,
romantic, Gothic, or grotesque traditions. 8

The disparity between "disabled" as an attributed, decontextualizing iden-
tity and the perceptions and experiences of real people living with disabilities
suggests that this figure of otherness emerges from positioning, interpreting,
and conforming meaning upon bodies. Representation yields cultural identities
and categories, the given paradigms Alfred Schutz calls "receptions," with which
we communally organize raw experience and routinely the world. 9 Literary
conventions even further mediate experience that the wider cultural matrix,
including literature itself, has already informed. If we accept the convention
that fiction has some mimetic relation to life, we grant it power to further
shape our perceptions of the world, especially regarding situations about
which we have little direct knowledge. Because disability is so strongly stig-
mated and is countered by so few mitigating narratives, the literary traffic in
metaphors often misrepresents or flattens the experience real people have
of their own or others' disabilities.

I therefore want to explicitly open up for the gap between disabled people and their representations by exploring how disability operates in texts. The rhetor-
cal effect of representing disability derives from social relations between peo-
ple who assume the normate position and those who are assigned the disabled
position. From folktales and classical myths to modern and postmodern
"grotesques," the disabled body is almost always a freakish spectacle presented
by the mediating narrative voice. Most disabled characters are enveloped by
the otherness that their disability signals in the text. Take, as a few examples,
Dickens's pathetic and romanticized Tiny Tim of A Christmas Carol, J. M. Bar-
rie's villainous Captain Hook from Peter Pan, Victor Hugo's Gothic Quasimodo
in The Hunchback of Notre Dame, D. H. Lawrence's impotent Chatt-
chester in Lady Chatterley's Lover, and Tennessee Williams's long-suffering
Laura Wingfield from The Glass Menagerie. The very act of representing cor-
poral otherness places them in a frame that highlights their differences from
ostensibly normate readers. Although such representations refer to actual so-
cial relations, they do not of course reproduce those relations with mimetic
fullness. Characters are thus necessarily rendered by a few determining
stereotypes that create an illusion of reality far short of the intricate, undifferen-
tiated, and uninterpreted context in which real people exist. Like the freak
shows that I will discuss in chapter 3, textual descriptions are overdetermined:
they invest the traits, qualities, and behaviors of their characters with much
rhetorical influence simply by omitting—and therefore erasing—other factors
or traits that might mitigate or complicate the delineations. A disability func-
tions only as visual difference that signals meanings. Consequently, literary
texts necessarily make disabled characters into freaks, stripped of normalized
contexts and engulfed by a single stigmatic trait.

Not only is the relationship between text and world not exact, but represen-
tation also relies upon cultural assumptions to fill in missing details. All
people construct interpretive schemata that make their worlds seem knowable
and predictable, thus producing perceptual categories that may harden into
stereotypes or caricatures when communally shared and culturally incul-
cated. 10 As Aristotle suggests in the Poetics, literary representation depends
more on probability—what people take to be accurate—than on reality. Car-
icatures and stereotypical portrayals that depend more on gesture than com-
plexity arise necessarily out of this gap between representation and life.

Stereotypes in life become tropes in textual representation. For example, Mar-
iana Torgovnick describes the trope of the primitive as a discursive construct
in the broadest sense, a "world" that has been "structured by sets of images and
ideas that have slipped from their original metaphoric status to control per-
ceptions of [actual] primitives." 11 Such portrayals invoke, reiterate, and are
re-
inflected by cultural stereotypes. A highly stigmatized characteristic like
disability gains its rhetorical effectiveness from the powerful, often mixed re-
sponses that real disabled people elicit from readers who consider themselves
normates. The more the literary portrait conforms to the social stereotype, the
more economical and intense is the effect; representation thus exaggerates an
already highlighted physical difference. Moreover, Western tradition posits
the visible world as the index of a coherent and just invisible world, encourag-
ing us to read the material body as a sign invested with transcendent meaning.

In interpreting the material world, literature tends to induce any visual differ-
ences with significance that obscures the complexity of their bearers.

Besides stripping any normalizing context away from disability, literary rep-
resentation sets up static encounters between disabled figures and normate
readers, whereas real social relations are always dynamic. Focusing on a body
feature to describe a character throws the reader into a confrontation with the
character that is predetermined by cultural notions about disability. With
the notable exception of autobiographical texts—such as Audre Lorde's Zami,
which I address in the last chapter—representation tends to objectify disabled
characters by denying them any opportunity for subjectivity or agency. The
plot or the work's rhetorical potential usually benefits from the disabled figure
remaining other to the reader—identifiably human but resolutely different.
How could Alah operate effectively if the reader were allowed to see him as
an ordinary fellow instead of as an icon of monomaniacal revenge—if his dis-
ance
about whether the encounter will be too uncomfortable for either of them to sustain and may feel the ever-present threat of rejection. Even though disability threatens to snap the slender thread of sociality, most physically disabled people are skilled enough in these encounters to repair the fabric of the relation so that it can continue.

To be granted fully human status by normates, disabled people must learn to manage relationships from the beginning. In other words, disabled people must use charm, intimidation, arduous, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort. Those of us with disabilities are supplicants and minstrels, striving to create valued representations of ourselves in our relations with the nondisabled majority. This is precisely what many newly disabled people can neither do nor accept; it is a subtle part of adjustment and often the most difficult. If such efforts at repartee are successful, disabled people neutralize the initial stigma of disability so that relationships can be sustained and deepened. Only then can other aspects of personhood emerge and expand the initial focus so that the relationship becomes more comfortable, more broadly based, and less affected by the disability. Only then can each person emerge as multifaceted, whole. If, however, disabled people pursue normalization too much, they risk denying limitations and pain for the comfort of others and may edge into the self-betrayal associated with “passing.”

This is not to suggest that all forms of disability are interchangeable or that all disabled people experience their bodies or negotiate their identities in the same ways. Indeed, it is precisely the variation among individuals that cultural categories trivialize and that representation often distorts. Disability is an overarching and in some ways artificial category that encompasses congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illness and retardation, chronic and acute illnesses, fatal and progressive diseases, temporary and permanent injuries, and a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks, unusual proportions, or obesity. Even though the prototypical disabled person posited in cultural representations never leaves a wheelchair, is totally blind, or profoundly deaf, most of the approximately forty million Americans with disabilities have a much more ambiguous relationship to the label. The physical impairments that render someone “disabled” are almost never absolute or static; they are dynamic, contingent conditions affected by many external factors and usually fluctuating over time. Some conditions, like multiple sclerosis or arthritis, are progressive and chronic; others, such as epilepsy, can be acute. Even seemingly static disabilities like amputation affect activities differently depending on the condition of the rest of the body.

Of course, everyone is subject to the gradually disabling process of aging.
The fact that we all become disabled if we live long enough is a reality many people who consider themselves able-bodied are reluctant to admit. As physical abilities change, so do individual needs, and the perception of those needs. The pain that often accompanies or causes disability also influences both the degree and the perception of impairment. According to Elaine Scarry, because pain is invisible, unverifiable and unrepresentable, it is often subject to misattribution or denial by those who are experiencing it. Disability, then, can be painful, comforting, familiar, alienating, bonding, isolating, disturbing, estranging, challenging, infuriating, or ordinary. Embedded in the complexity of actual human relations, it is always more than the disabled figure can signify. That anyone can become disabled at any time makes disability more fluid, and perhaps more threatening, to those who identify themselves as normates than such seemingly more stable marginal identities as femaleness, blackness, or nondominant ethnic identities. In addition, the time and way in which one becomes disabled influences its perception, as do the ways one incorporates disability into one's sense of self or resists it. In fact, the gradual disablement of aging or a progressive illness may not be considered a disability at all. In contrast, a severe, sudden impairment, as from an accident, is almost always experienced as a greater loss than is a congenital or gradual disability, which does not demand adjustment so abruptly. A disability's degree of visibility also affects social relations. An invisible disability, much like a homosexual identity, always presents the dilemma of whether or when to come out or to pass. One must always anticipate the risk of incurring a new relationship by announcing an invisible impairment or the equal hazard of surprising someone by revealing a previously undisclosed disability. The distinction between formal and functional aspects of a disability affects its perception as well. People whose disability is primarily functional but not visible often are accused of malingering or of disappointing expectations about their physical capabilities. Yet those whose disabilities are largely formal often are considered incapable of things they can easily do. Furthermore, formal conditions such as facial disfigurement, scarring, birthmarks, obesity, and visual or hearing impairments corrected with mechanical aids are usually socially disabling, even though they entail almost no physical dysfunction. Moreover, as the story of the freak show that appears in chapter 3 reveals, no firm distinction exists between primarily formal disabilities and racial physical features considered atypical by dominant, white standards.

Although categories such as ethnicity, race, and gender are based on shared traits that result in community formation, disabled people seldom consider themselves a group. Little somatic commonality exists among people with different kinds of disabilities because needs and situations are so diverse. A blind person, an epileptic, a paraplegic, a deaf person, and an amputee, for example, have no shared cultural heritage, traditional activities, or common physical experience. Only the shared experience of stigmatization creates commonality. Having been acculturated similarly to everyone else, disabled people also often avoid and stereotype one another in attempting to normalize their own social identities. Moreover, many disabled people at one time considered themselves nondisabled and may have had very limited contact with disabled people before joining their group. As with all culturally imposed categories, these are extrapolated from biological differences, the identity has a forced quality that levels intragroup variations. For example, the now discredited institution of "special" education enacts this cultural impulse toward ghettoization by segregating people with disabilities from nondisabled students regardless of individual needs. Finally, most disabled people are surrounded by nondisabled families and communities in which disabilities are unanticipated and almost always perceived as calamitous. Unlike the ethnically grouped, more like gays and lesbians, disabled people are sometimes fundamentally isolated from each other, existing often as aliens within their social units.

Yet representation frequently obscures these complexities in favor of the rhetorical or symbolic potential of the prototypical disabled figure, who often functions as a lightning rod for the pity, fear, discomfort, guilt, or sense of normalcy of the reader or a more significant character. I intend here to shift from this usual interpretive framework of aesthetics and metaphor to the critical arena of cultural studies to deconstruct such representations. By examining the "disabled figure," rather than discussing the "grotesque" or "cripple" or "deformed," I hope to problematize this analysis out of a purely aesthetic context and into a political one. By opening up a critical gap between disabled figures as fashioned corporeal others whose bodies carry social meaning and actual people with atypical bodies in real-world social relations, I suggest that representation informs the identity—and often the fate—of real people with extraordinary bodies.

An Overview and a Manifesto

In a sense, this book is a manifesto that places disability studies within a humanities context. Although disability studies has developed as a subfield of scholarly inquiry in the academic fields of sociology, medical anthropology, special education, and rehabilitation medicine, almost no studies in the humanities explicitly study disability within a politicized, social constructionist
perspective. One of my aims in this book, then, is to begin formulating what disability studies might look like as a subfield in literary criticism and cultural studies. I will therefore outline in some detail here the contexts and the arguments that appear in the following chapters.

This project entails two tasks: first, theorizing the operation of disability in cultural and literary representation; and second, focusing on exemplary sites that construct disability in culture and in texts. Thus, part 1 of the book incorporates a range of theoretical work from various academic arenas, most of which does not address disability directly but instead conceptually dances around its edges. Having examined in this introduction how the disabled figure operates in literary representation and having probed as well the differences between disability in life and in representation, I explore in chapter 2 the ways that several discourses address the construction of disability. First, I detail the cultural interweaving of femininity and disability and recruit feminist theory as a related discourse of otherness that can be transferred to analyses of disability. Second, I enlist three sociocultural theories, Erving Goffman’s notion of stigma, Mary Douglas’s concept of dirt, and Michel Foucault’s ideas on particularity and identity, in order to uncover the processes that construct disability. Third, I critique the role of the disabled figure within the ideology of liberal individualism. Finally, I analyze how the ideology of work has constructed the disabled figure over time as the means of addressing disability has shifted from a compensatory to an accommodation model. These theoretical speculations lay the groundwork for the analyses that follow, each of which centers on narratives of corporeal otherness that raise broad questions of how whiteness is represented in American culture.

Part 2 shows how the ideologies of self-reliance, autonomy, progress, and work, as well as the processes of stigmatization and the formation of the modern subject, influence how the disabled figure and the cultural self are represented at specific literary and cultural sites. As I have suggested, these particular sites allow me to probe the complexities in cultures use of disabled figures. Each cultural and literary production explored here employs disabled figures in ways that sometimes reinscribe their cultural otherness but also at times exploit the disabled figure’s potential for challenging the institutions and political policies that derive from and support a narrow norm. These narratives of corporeal/cultural difference thus simultaneously confirm and challenge the received definition of physical disability as bodily inadequacy.

Chapter 3 examines American freak shows as popular social rituals that constructed and disseminated a figure whose crucial cultural work was to exhibit to the American masses what they imagined themselves not to be. Such shows choreographed human variation into a spectacle of bodily otherness that united their audiences in opposition to the freaks’ aberration and assured the onlookers that they were in fact “normal.” Highly structured conventions of representation sculpted exoticized “freaks” from people who have what we now call “physical disabilities,” as well as from other people whose bodies could be made to visually signify absolute alienness. Giants, dwarfs, visibly physically disabled people, tribal non-Westerners, contortionists, fat people, thin people, hermaphrodites, the mentally disabled, and the very handsome—all shared the platform equally as human oddities. Their only commonality was being physically different from their audiences. For the price of a ticket, the process of what David H. Levy calls “disempowerment” offered to the spectators an icon of physical otherness that reinforced the onlookers’ common American identity, verified by a body that suddenly seemed by comparison ordinary, tractable, and standard.

I also suggest that freak shows at the same time offered a counternarrative of peculiarity as eminence, the kind of distinction described by Bakhtin’s and Foucault’s notions of the particularized pre-Enlightenment body. Straddling the ideologies of the traditional and the modern, the freak show manifested tension between an older mode that read particularity as a mark of empowering distinction and a newer mode that flattened differences to achieve equal. In such a liminal space, the domesticated freak simultaneously embodied exceptionality as marvel and exceptionality as anomaly, thus posing to the spectator the implicit political question of how to interpret differences within an egalitarian social order.

Chapter 4 centers on sentimental social protest novels written by mid-nineteenth-century middle-class white women, in which disabled figures function as discursive lightning rods for complex social tensions. I argue that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Rebecca Harding Davis’s Life in the Iron Mills, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s The Silent Partner construct gendered and racialized disabled figures as icons of corporeal vulnerability in an attempt to spotlight the conflict between social justice and individual freedom inherent in the American liberal tradition. This cluster of texts introduces what I call a compulsion model, in which disability is interpreted as a lack that must be compensated for by what I term the “benefident maternalism” of the middle-class women. Whereas freak shows literally display the disabled to confirm the “normal,” these texts display disabled figures in order to mobilize and validate social reform agendas. Although the disabled figures invoke a rhetoric of sympathy to achieve sociopolitical reform, they also define and legitimize the normalized, gendered role of the maternal beneficent that these novels promote for women of the emerging middle class, who were marginal-
ized within the changing social order. The increasingly negative portrayals of disabled women figures as the genre moves from Stowe through Phelps con- 

tinues an anxious subtext that splits the disabled women and the benefac- 
tories, paralleling the displacement of middle-class white women from 
meaningful work. This escalating renunciation of the disabled figure tests the 
limits of domesticity's script of maternal benevolence as a solution to the prob-

dless of female roles in late-nineteenth-century America. 

Chapter 5 discusses several twentieth-century, women-centered African-

American literary novels that use the disabled figure and other extraordinary 

bodies to elaborate an identity that insists upon and celebrates physical dif-

ference. In these texts, the extraordinary body invokes a principle of difference 

over sameness that serves a postmodern politics that is nationalist rather than 

assimilatonist. Whereas the nineteenth-century sentimental novels of the 

previous chapter cast the disabled figure as antithetical to the female role they 

sought to delineate, these black nationalist texts incorporate such a figure into 

their vision of oppositional identity. Ann Petry's 1946 novel The Street tenta-

tively initiates this type of representation, and is followed by the post-civil 

rights version of black female subjectivity articulated by Toni Morrison's first 

five novels and by Audre Lorde's "heterotopia" Zami: A New Spelling of 

My Name. I suggest that one rhetorical aim of these works is to establish a nar-

rative of the particularized body as a site of politicized historical inscription in-

stead of physical deviance. Disabled figures such as Morrison's Eve Peace and 

Baby Suggs, for example, revise a history of assigned corporeal inferiority so 

that bodily differences become markers of exceptionality to be claimed and

honored. This ideology of identity as particularity rejects the cultural imple-

mentation of democracy that normalizes sameness and stigmatizes difference. 

Such a strategy of identity formation validates what I call an accommodation 

model of interpreting disability, as opposed to the earlier compensation model. 

My final point is that this appropriation of the extraordinary body rehabilitates 

the premodern narrative of the wondrous freaks by casting the disabled 

women as politicized marvelous monsters (in the medieval sense) whose sin-

gular bodies bear the etchings of individual and collective history. 

Although none of these cultural or textual sites employs the politicized term 
"physical disability" that is at the center of this study, the freak show, this sen-


timental reform fiction, and these black women's literary novels all partici-
pate in varying ways in the cultural work of defining the disabled subject as an 

object of visual difference. This book thus begins what I hope will be a lively 

conversation within the humanities not only about the construction of disable-


ty through representation but also about the attendant political consequences. 

N O T E S

1. Disability, Identity, and Representation: An Introduction

1. For example, two recent books that analyze "race" and "gender," respectively, as 
historical, ideological constructions legitimated by physical differences are Thomas 

Luporini, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge: Harvard 

University Press, 1990), and Kwame Anthony Appiah, In My Father's House (New York: 

Oxford University Press, 1992), an exploration of "the idea of the Negro, the idea of an 

African race" (p. 8). Disability has been acknowledged in American studies by Douglas 

C. Boyarin's study of the metaphysical construction of deafness in the nineteenth cen-

tury, A Talent Exile on This Earth: The Metaphorical Construction of Deafness in the 

Nineteenth Century" in American Quarterly 44 (2): 216-43, by David A. Gebbie, "He-

mes and Maimed: The Troubled Social Reintegration of Disabled Veterans in The First 

Years of Our Lives" in American Quarterly 46 (1994): 545-74; and by Martin Norden in 
The Cinema of Suggestion: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies (New Brunswick, 

N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994). Disability studies is a recognized and articulated 
subfield of sociology that tends to emphasize medical anthropology, social policy, and 

rehabilitative medicine, although the voices of cultural critics are emerging here as 
well. Several important studies of the social, political, and legal history of disabled peo-

ple treat disability as a social construction; for example, see Deborah Stone, The Dis-

abled State (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Richard Scoville, Peace Good 

Will to Civil Rights: Transforming Federal Disability Policy (Philadelphia: Temple Uni-

versity Press, 1984); Neta Ginsburg, Everyone Must Speak Sign Language: Hereditary 

Deafness on Martha's Vineyard (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); Stephen 

Sandel et al., eds., The Dilemmas of Difference: A Multidisciplinary View of Stigma (New 

York: Plenum Press, 1986); Robert Bogdan, Flexing the Pinkie: Presuming Human Oddity for 

Amusement and Profit (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); David Henry, The 

Country That Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery (New York: Routledge, 

1992); Claire Lanchette, Disability as Social Construct: Legislator Notes (Philadelphia: 

University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Disabil-

ities of Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Martha Minow,


3. See Nora Grun's study of the prevalence of hereditary deafness on Martha's Vineyard (Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language).


5. My repeated use of the term "figure" is meant to indicate an important distinction between actual people with disabilities and the subject positions "disabled" and "ability-bodied" that culture assigns and that must be negotiated in lives and relationships. As products of cultural representation, figures reveal attitudes and assumptions about disability that make up the ideological environment. As I suggest later, there is always a gap between the subjective experience and the cultural identity of having a disability, between any actual life and any imposed social category. From this gap arises the alienation and sense of oppression with which people labeled as different must contend. It should be clear that this study focuses on the representations of disability that yield stigmatized collective identities, not the histories of actual people who have physical disabilities.

6. This term was suggested in jest by my colleague, the sociologist David Evans, in an informal talk given at the 1989 Society for Disability Studies Annual Conference in Denver.


11. Marianna Torgovnick's discussion of Homer's Polyphemus as one of the earliest Western tropes of personism discourse is suggestive here (Homer Primates: Savage Beasts, Modern Loan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 8). According to Torgovnick, Odysseus becomes a kind of founding father of ethnography by reading the Cyclops's其它ness as uncivilized and savage. Grounded in physiognomy, Polyphemus's otherness is figured as the monstrous state of being cycloptic (cycloptic fetuses are always stillborn). Torgovnick does not note that Polyphemus's aberrant physical form, not simply his foreignness, determines his otherness. In fact, this visible physical stigma perhaps the most salient feature of the story. Moreover, Polyphemus's treatment by Odysseus seems to be justified because the Cyclops is inhuman, and he is inhuman because he is physically different from Odysseus. I would add to Torgovnick's observation, then, that the representation of Polyphemus can also be read as an early and definitive instance of physical disability as a sign of inhumanity.