

The Critical Limits of Embodiment: Disability's Criticism

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No one is ever more than temporarily able-bodied. This fact frightens those of us who half-imagine ourselves as minds in a material context, who have learned to resent the publicness of race- or sex- or otherwise-marked bodies and to think theories of embodiment as theories about the subjectivity of able-bodied comportment and practice under conditions of systematic injustice. From this perspective, disability studies may be twice marginalized—first, by able-bodied anxiety; second, by a tendency to treat disability as just another hindrance to social mobility, perhaps one best left to medical discourse or descriptive sociology.

New work in disability studies, however, challenges established habits of thought about “having” a body. Disability studies dissolves deeply entrenched mind-and-body distinctions and further destabilizes the concept of the normal, whose charted internal ambiguities have themselves become too familiar. An ethics and a politics of disability are crucial to the work of the university—pedagogically, theoretically,

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Public Culture

and institutionally. But reconfiguring knowledge in light of disability criticism is a project that is likely to take longer than making public space accessible.

Disability studies teaches that an assumed able body is crucial to the smooth operation of traditional theories of democracy, citizenship, subjectivity, beauty, and capital. By assuming that the normative human is an able-bodied adult, for example, liberal theory can conflate political or economic interests with desires, political representation with having a voice in policy-making, social organization with voluntary association, and so on. Liberal theory naturalizes the political by making it personal. And the “person” at the center of the traditional liberal theory is not simply an individual locus of subjectivity (however psychologically fragmented, incoherent, or troubled). He is an *able-bodied* locus of subjectivity, one whose unskilled labor may be substituted freely for the labor of other such individuals, one who can imagine himself largely self-sufficient because almost everything conspires to help him take his enabling body for granted (even when he is scrambling for the means of subsistence). However, the mere possibility of a severely cognitively disabled adult citizen disrupts the liberal equations of representation and voice, desire and interest. Advocacy for the severely cognitively disabled is not a matter of voicing their demands. More generally, the intricate practical dialectics of dependence and independence in the lives of many disabled people unsettle ideals of social organization as freely chosen expressions of mutual desire.

Innovative intellectual formations in the academy—including feminist, post-colonial, sexuality, gender, queer, and critical race studies—have brought energy to work on the body. They have taught us to think the body as a site of excess and surplus, to theorize the extreme body, the mutilated body, the body in pleasure and pain (as James Porter and others have pointed out).¹ They counter the medical focus on alterity as a matter of having too little or too much of a body. Different kinds of inter- and cross-disciplinary work on the marked body, moreover, have contributed significantly to each other. Critical race theorists, for example, have pointed to the whiteness of feminism. The ensuing debates have led to work that seeks to demonstrate the constitutive relation between race and gender. These two realms—once considered separate—now refract and image each other. But disability studies reminds us that feminism, sexuality and gender studies, and

1. See James I. Porter, “Foreword,” in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, ed. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), xiii–xiv. Also excerpted as “[The Body in Theory]” in the dossier “The Bather: Self-Portraiture from a Movable Chair” (self-portraiture by Tabata Hideomi), *Public Culture* 11 (1999): 440–41.

critical race theory meet at a point of incomprehension when faced with the corporeality of the disabled body.

There are also signs that the time has come to examine the relation between disability studies and queer theory.² Both seek to elucidate the trouble with the ideal of the normal. Both work to disrupt the picture of the heteronormative family as the fundamental building block of a stable liberal polity, the site of care and nurture for the young, and the sole appropriate object of adult intimate aspiration. In general, however, the one does not read the other. These two fields of knowledge, now operating in parallel, might also operate relationally. They share constitutive sites of convergence organized around the contested regimens of bodily normativity and the normalizing regulation of bodies within a social space. If we think disability as a different kind of drag, a lively conversation may be made possible between queer and crip theorists.

If the difference that we name *disability* promises to turn some intellectual work upside down, a special challenge for *Public Culture* is to unsettle the tendency in disability studies to universalize various Western values and assumptions. This challenge remains: to be self-conscious about cultural locations in order to query the body-related universalisms of Western thought—even new Western thought—and to identify the nonuniversalizable in order to call into view the personhood of disability.

Disability's Well-Being

Concepts of citizenship, the economy, and the body are embedded in understandings of what constitutes well-being, understandings that generally exclude or marginalize the forms or realities of disability. There are concepts of well-being that value happiness and desire fulfillment on the one hand and liberty and entitlement on the other. Some focus on individual well-being. Others take well-being as a collective state. In either case, we can ask how concepts of well-being would be affected if the modal subject were disabled.

Who, for example, is the subject of economist Amartya Sen's (and more recently philosopher Martha Nussbaum's) "capabilities" approach to human well-being? Does a capabilities approach to well-being presume that the subject pos-

2. See, for example, Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1999), and Shohini Ghosh, "Queer Pleasures for Queer People: Film, Television, and Queer Sexuality in India," in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York: Routledge, 2001).

The Critical Limits of Embodiment

Public Culture

sesses a (cap)able body? If so, what new questions would emerge if we posit a *disabled* modal subject of political economy? The image of a flourishing disabled person in good health, living her life to the fullest, challenges the presumption that a person with a disability necessarily lacks well-being and good health. Or are figures of disability always already conceptually consigned to the position of calling into being the limits of concepts such as normality and flourishing? By way of example, what would a concept of well-being look like if the maimed and disabled in countries riddled with land mines, such as Afghanistan, Cambodia and Angola, were made a measure of capability rather than a measure of its limits? We could ask similar questions of key concepts in education, citizenship, medicine, and the law: What would these concepts look like if disabled figures were our modal subjects? *Disability* itself covers a multitude of heterogeneous axes of difference. There is no single figure of disability. And unless we assume that all these modes of difference are correctable deviations from a presumed normal center, we will be hard-pressed to come up with a singular, concrete standard of individual or collective well-being against which to measure social justice.

The presumed able-bodied human subject *has* been contested in some educational spheres, of course. From the perspective of families in the global South, some European and North American countries appear to offer disabled children more opportunities. On these grounds, in recent years, some Asian and African parents have migrated to places where they can imagine a better life world for their progeny. These parents discover that the disabled child has become the icon of opportunity for the disabled at large in countries such as the United States. Largely as a result of parental initiative and struggle, policies mandated by the state have given disabled children more freedoms and services than they may have elsewhere.

But these parents also discover that the freedoms of adulthood have yet to be conferred in the same measure on disabled adults. Adulthood is not only a matter of age; it also corresponds to access to work, and historically the workplace has been less friendly to persons with disabilities than has the education system. In the absence of a job, a disabled adult may become dependent on familial, state, or charitable support. The legal system and the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have brought changes in access to services, but not, in general, to the workplace in the United States.

This contrast is highlighted in the ironic situation of U.S. teachers who have disabilities. In the sphere of education considerable attention has been paid to the well-being of the child who is disabled; however, this same sphere has been unfriendly to the idea of giving equal access to teachers who are disabled. An ele-

mentary school student with impaired cognitive ability who cannot walk is likely to have greater access to services in school than is a teacher who has full cognitive ability but uses a wheelchair. The hiring of teachers who are disabled is a remote possibility in the first place; even if they are hired, securing the legally required accessible bathrooms is likely to be a major struggle that can and often does put their jobs on the line. The stubborn politics of localities frequently trump legally mandated obligations.

Just as families of the disabled migrate, ideas about disabilities circulate throughout North America and Europe and other parts of the world. An example from India, also drawn from the sphere of education, illustrates some of the possible implications for a local context of this transnational negotiation of disability. In Mumbai, the Spastic Society of India has formed a partnership with a Canadian organization to create a Centre for Inclusion. The Centre recently hosted two international conferences, one focusing on citizenship and the other on education, to open a debate on disability issues as well as to put pressure on the Indian state, the city of Mumbai, and the university system to participate in rethinking what constitutes a just society, especially in the context of (Hindu) hierarchical value systems.

Although the Spastic Society is a service and an advocacy body established specifically for the disabled, at the education conference its director made a call for universal public education in India. What this call for universal access in fact pointed to was the wide reach of practices of exclusion in India (and other parts of the world). In some areas, this exclusion is explicit. In Mumbai, special government support for elementary education is provided for the able-bodied child who lives in a slum but is withheld from the slum-dwelling child who is disabled. Deemed unworthy, the disabled child is thus written out of the necessary support to acquire the reading, writing, and math skills demanded by modernity. But it is not only the disabled child who is excluded from the classroom. The able-bodied child who is poor, female, lower caste, and/or ethnically or religiously Other is more likely to be excluded than is the Hindu, upper-class, upper-caste boy. To advocate only for the inclusion of the disabled child, when large parts of the population in Mumbai (and elsewhere in India) are excluded on other grounds, would be to advocate for partial inclusion, an idea antithetical to the aspirations of a principled pursuit of universal education.

Here, the disabled are “good to think”: by thinking the question of education and the disabled organized around the idea of inclusion, for example, the gender bias of education in India becomes clear. Despite a constitutional and Supreme Court mandate of universal elementary education, the female literacy rate in

The Critical Limits of Embodiment

Public Culture

India has been calculated in recent years at a mere 50 percent, a rate that is lower than that of sub-Saharan Africa. Close to 245 million Indian women do not have the ability to read and write.

Placed outside of education and the workplace (as conventionally understood), some children in the global South find their way to the streets, which they share with others, outcasted by poverty and disability, who have only their bodies for shelter. In the North, the street has become the site of other kinds of circulation. Curb cuts make circulation possible for those who walk, as well as for those who use mobility devices such as wheelchairs, walkers, and baby strollers. A cut is a paved but sloped opening in the curb at crosswalks and intersections that makes the sidewalk and the street negotiable without imposing a step up or down. Increasingly widespread as a result of ADA legislation, curb cuts have turned out to be a good for us all, not just for the disabled. With the elimination of the curb, the spatial obstacle to mobility created by engineers and city planners is removed and, likewise, the walker ceases to be the modal resident. Rather than present an impediment to mobility, this altered relation between the street and the sidewalk allows for more universal circulation.

What if we invert the conventional wisdom that sees the disabled body as an impediment to mobility (as in the figure of the cripple in Marx) and, hence, both to work and to the circulation of social and economic relations. The inversion would read, by way of example, something like this: Since both capitalist and socialist economies privilege the able body as the basis for the built environment, the able body could appear to interrupt the mobility of the disabled one. Spatially, curbs designed to separate the street from the sidewalk also separate the walker from the wheeled vehicles designed for transportation. The presumed city inhabitant is a walker and not a wheeler. Thus, when curbs interfere with the circulation of wheelers, it can be said that the able body disturbs the mobility of the disabled one.

The Willed Production of the Disabled

The willed production of disability would be unrecognizable as having value in any understanding of a bourgeois or middle-class sensibility. The body is sacrosanct. The idea of willingly maiming people is abhorrent or aberrant. But at precisely this juncture, liberal social and political theory reaches an aporia of sorts. Choice, especially in such middle-class matters of intimacy and privacy as procreation, is likewise sacrosanct in liberal theory. Can liberal theory understand a middle-class woman's decision knowingly to carry a disabled fetus to term as

The Critical Limits of Embodiment

other than the willed production of disability? If not, then *which* forms of disability can she choose to nurture or risk in her offspring? Is a pregnant woman who is in a position to undergo multiple genetic screenings required, somehow, to take test after test to ensure that she will not give birth to a child with an *impermissible* disability? And what likelihood of impermissible disability would a woman be allowed to hazard? The specter of eugenics threatens here. But if liberal theory must respect timely reproductive choices in general, then it likewise must countenance the possibility of disabled modal citizens.

A different kind of willed disability is associated with Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Practices such as clitoridectomy or the mutilation of infants by beggar gangs occasion reflection on “native” incivility. In the global North, these willfully produced disabilities are interpreted as the result of native forms of violence, unruly native ethical systems, and repulsive natural cultural practices that deform and maim. Yet the United States, through the collaboration of science, the university, and the state, has also disabled its own. In developing and detonating the atomic bomb, for example, defense intellectuals and scientists associated with the Manhattan Project irradiated human and animal populations in the American West as well as army recruits and (it is suspected) residents of mental institutions who were crouching in tunnels during the bomb tests.³ After years of secrecy and denial, as a result of a lawsuit representing the maimed and the ill, the U.S. government has finally acknowledged its obligations to citizens it once classified as “low-use segments of the population.”⁴ Because of state secrecy, we do not know precisely what future forms of state-produced disability lie before us.

Thinking about the conditions under which disability is produced raises questions about experimentation, negligence, and culturally mandated body modification. It also raises questions about the character of disability itself.

Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy

Some of us have hereditary traits that register socially and culturally as disabilities. Some of us become disabled naturally through aging, coercively through warfare, and accidentally through misfortune—whether the disabling incident occurs during the passage through the birth canal (when cerebral palsy can occur), at the

3. See Mike Davis, “Dead West: Ecocide in Marlborough County,” *New Left Review*, no. 200 (1993): 49–73.

4. Carole Gallagher, *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), xxiii, quoted in Davis, “Dead West,” 64.

Public Culture

industrial workplace, or in the course of everyday life. No one emerges self-sufficient from the womb, no able-bodied person can be sure that she will continue to be able-bodied throughout her later years, and there is no guarantee that any of us will escape disabling encounters with the world. In this sense, no one is ever more than temporarily able-bodied. The designation *temporarily able-bodied* invites us to consider different sorts of vulnerability, different points of frailty, as features of our common lot and accordingly to shift our understandings of flourishing, social justice, and embodiment.

Anxiety on the part of the able-bodied that their condition is both fortunate and temporary implicitly acknowledges that things can happen to make life much more difficult for them than it is at present—on even the worst, the most impossible, day. The anxiety and the significance of able-bodiedness register the centrality of economic circumstances to disability studies. In the United States, for example, few of us are ever more than a few paychecks away from material devastation. Developing an understanding of social justice informed by disability studies would require us to break frame with much current thought about the distribution of social goods and resources and with the traditional rationales given for various distributive schemes. Whether the “goods” to be “distributed” were educational, nutritional, material, social, or political, we would no longer be able to see the *end* of social justice as the production of a body politic, each member of which brought a roughly equal share of cognitive, affective, and physical “ability” to the business of the daily reproduction of individual and social life.

Traditional theories of justice always tend to presuppose that the places where wealth is lodged now are places where it belongs, that it was accumulated in some legitimate, vaguely Lockean fashion, and that the way to produce equity is by ensuring that individuals are well equipped to pursue wealth individually. The production of disability through, for example, warfare and conditions of poverty that defy Lockean analysis, the nurture of a *heterogeneously* able society through liberal reproductive choice, and the victories won through disability activism make disability studies a powerful lever for transforming traditional North American and European work on justice.

We need to ask what justice would look like if we assumed that everybody who is here belongs here and that any reasonable image of collective flourishing will take this into account. A first step might be to imagine collectivities—for example, a disabled person and her caregivers—as the bearer of rights, rather than simply to identify a collective’s individual members as rights-bearers. In thinking disability, we have the opportunity to rethink the basis of social collectivity more generally and, through it, both well-being and justice.

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**The Critical Limits of
Embodiment**

