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## *Disability, Identity, and Representation: An Introduction*

### The Disabled Figure in Culture

In its broadest sense, this book investigates how representation attaches meanings to bodies. Although much recent scholarship explores how difference and identity operate in such politicized constructions as gender, race, and sexuality, cultural and literary criticism has generally overlooked the related perceptions of corporeal otherness we think of variously as “monstrosity,” “mutilation,” “deformation,” “crippledness,” or “physical disability.”<sup>1</sup> Yet the physically extraordinary figure these terms describe is as 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 terms and expand our understanding of the cultural construction of bodies and identity by reframing “disability” as another culture-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 encoding 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 peripheral so as to view the

whole in a fresh way. By contextualizing the disabled figure as the paradigm of what culture calls deviant, I hope to expose the assumptions that support seemingly neutral norms. Therefore, I focus here on how disability operates in culture and on how the discourses of disability, race, gender and sexuality intermingle to create figures of otherness from the raw materials of bodily variation, specifically at sites of representation such as the freak show, sentimental fiction, and black women's liberatory novels. Such an analysis furthers our collective understanding of the complex processes by which *all* forms of corporeal diversity acquire the cultural meanings undergirding 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 deviance, 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 reading of bodily particularities in the context of social power relations, I intend to counter the accepted notions 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 contextualized view of disability 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 concedes that being legally disabled is also a matter of "being regarded as having such an impairment."<sup>2</sup> Essential but implicit to this definition is that both "impairment" and "limits" depend on comparing individual bodies with unstated 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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-ordinariness 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 possessing valued physical characteristics and maintains its ascendancy 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, the one is beautiful or perfect and that one is grotesque or ugly. In the economy of visual difference, those bodies deemed inferior become spectacles of otherness, while the unmarked are sheltered in the neutral space of normativity. Invested with meanings that far outstrip their biological bases, figures such as the cripple, the quadroom, the queer, the outsider, the whore are taxonomical, ideological products marked by socially determined stigmata, defined through representation, and excluded from social power and status. Thus, the cultural other and the cultural self operate together as opposing twin figures that legitimate a system of social, economic, and political empowerment justified by physiological differences.<sup>5</sup>

As I examine the disabled figure, I will also trouble the mutually constituting figure this study coins: the normate. This neologism names the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries.<sup>6</sup> 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 capital 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 people. Living 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, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports."<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Goffman takes for granted that femaleness 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 stepsisters 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 analyses beyond the simple dichotomies of male/female, white/black, straight/gay, or able-bodied/disabled so that we can examine the subtle interrelations 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 otherness. Because figures of otherness are highly marked in power relations, even as they are marginalized, their cultural visibility is abundant, obscures and

neutralizes the normative figure that they legitimate. To analyze the operation of disability, it is essential then to theorize at length—as I do in part 1—about the processes and assumptions that produce both the normate and its discordant companion figures. However, I also want to complicate any simple dichotomy 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 representations 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, because 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 representation suggests that disability functions as a multivalent trope, though it remains the mark of otherness. Although centering on disabled figures illuminates the processes that sort and rank physical differences into normal and abnormal, at the same time, these investigations suggest the possibility of potentially positive, complicating interpretations. In short, by examining disability as a reading of the body that is inflected by race, ethnicity, and gender, I hope to reveal possibilities for signification that go beyond a monologic interpretation of corporeal difference as deviance. Thus, by first theorizing disability and then examining several sites that construct it, I can uncover the complex ways that disability intersects with other social identities to produce the extraordinary and the ordinary figures who haunt us all.

### The Disabled Figure in Literature

The discursive construct of the disabled figure, informed more by received attitudes than by people's actual experience of disability, circulates in culture and finds 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, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability'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 sentimental, romantic, Gothic, or grotesque traditions.<sup>8</sup>

The disparity between “disabled” as an attributed, decontextualizing identity and the perceptions and experiences of real people living with disabilities suggests that this figure of otherness emerges from positioning, interpreting, and conferring meaning upon bodies. Representation yields cultural identities and categories, the given paradigms Alfred Schutz calls “recipes,” with which we communally organize raw experience and routinize the world.<sup>9</sup> 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 stigmatized 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 the gap between disabled people and their representations by exploring how disability operates in texts. The rhetorical effect of representing disability derives from social relations between people who assume the normative 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. Barrie’s villainous Captain Hook from *Peter Pan*, Victor Hugo’s Gothic Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, D. H. Lawrence’s impotent Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and Tennessee Williams’s long-suffering Laura Wingfield from *The Glass Menagerie*. The very act of representing corporeal otherness places them in a frame that highlights their differences from ostensibly normative readers. Although such representations refer to actual social relations, they do not of course reproduce those relations with mimetic fullness. Characters are thus necessarily rendered by a few determining strokes that create an illusion of reality far short of the intricate, undifferentiated, 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 made disabled characters into freaks, stripped of normalizing contexts and engulfed by a single stigmatic trait.

Not only is the relationship between text and world not exact, but representation 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 inculturated.<sup>10</sup> As Aristotle suggests in the *Poetics*, literary representation depends more on probability—what people take to be accurate—than on reality. Caricatures and stereotypical portrayals that depend more on gesture than complexity arise necessarily out of this gap between representation and life. Stereotypes in life become tropes in textual representation. For example, Marianna 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 metaphorical status to control perceptions of [factual] primitives.”<sup>11</sup> Such portrayals invoke, reiterate, and are reinforced by cultural stereotypes. A highly stigmatized characteristic like disability gains its rhetorical effectiveness from the powerful, often mixed responses that real disabled people elicit from readers who consider themselves normates. The more the literary portrayal 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, encouraging us to read the material body as a sign invested with transcendent meaning. In interpreting the material world, literature tends to imbue any visual differences with significance that obscures the complexity of their bearers.

Besides stripping any normalizing context away from disability, literary representation sets up static encounters between disabled figures and normative 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 Ahab 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-

ability best its true content meaning. What would happen to the pure pity generated for Tiny Tim if he were portrayed as, sometimes naughtily, like a “normal” child? Thus the rhetorical function of the highly charged trait fixes relations between disabled figures and their reader. If disabled characters acted, as real people with disabilities often do, to counter their stigmatized status, the rhetorical potency of the stigma would be mitigated or lost. If Hawthorne’s *Chillingworth* made many friends, for instance, or appeared lovable to Hester, his role in *The Scarlet Letter* would be diminished. If Flannery O’Connor’s Hulga Hopewell were pretty, cheerful, and one-legged instead of ugly and bitter, “Good Country People” would fail. So, like *tabulae vivants*, beauty pageants, and freak shows—all related forms of representation grounded in the conventions of spectacle—literary narratives of disability usually depend on the objectification of the spectacle that representation has created.

### The Gap Between Representation and Reality

Whether one lives with a disability or encounters someone who has one, the actual experience of disability is more complex and more dynamic than representation usually suggests. Just one example illustrates the skill disabled people often must learn in managing social encounters. Initial or casual exchanges between normative and disabled people differ markedly from the usual relations between readers and disabled characters. In a first encounter with another person, a tremendous amount of information must be organized and interpreted simultaneously: each participant probes the explicit for the implicit, determines what is significant for particular purposes, and prepares a response that is guided by many cues, both subtle and obvious. When one person has a visible disability, however, it almost always dominates and skews the normative’s process of sorting out perceptions and forming a reaction.<sup>12</sup> The interaction is usually strained because the nondisabled person may feel fear, pity, fascination, repulsion, or merely surprise, none of which is expressible according to social protocol. Besides the discomforting dissonance between experienced and expressed reaction, a nondisabled person often does not know how to act toward a disabled person: how or whether to offer assistance; whether to acknowledge the disability; what words, gestures, or expectations to use or avoid. Perhaps most destructive to the potential for continuing relations is the normative’s frequent assumption that a disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute. This uncertainty and discord make the encounter especially stressful for the nondisabled person unaccustomed to disabled people. The disabled person may be anxious

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 sociability, 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, ardor, 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.<sup>13</sup> If such efforts at reparation 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 will all become disabled as we live long enough is a reality many people who consider themselves able-bodied are reluctant to admit.<sup>14</sup> As physical abilities change, so do individual needs, and the perception of those needs. The pain that often accompanies a career 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 not experiencing it.<sup>15</sup> Disability, then, can be painful, comfortable, familiar, alienating, bonding, isolating, disturbing, enduring, challenging, infuriating, or ordinary. Imbedded 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 normative or nondominant ethnic identities.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the time and way in which one becomes disabled influence its perception, as do the ways one incorporates disability into one's sense of self or resists it. For instance, the gradual disbursement 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 tainting 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 history 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 ethnic, race, and gender are based on shared traits that result in community formation, disabled people seldom consider themselves a group. Little somatic community exists, among people with dif-

ferent 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 extrapolated from biological differences, the identity has a forced quality that levels intragroup variations. For example, the now crumbling 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, but more like gays and lesbians, disabled people are sometimes fundamentally isolated from each other, existing often as aliens within their social units.<sup>17</sup>

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 denaturalize such representations. By examining the "disabled figure" rather than discussing the "grotesque" or "cripple" or "deformed," I hope to catapult this analysis out of a purely aesthetic context and into a political one. By opening up a critical gap between disabled figures as fashioned corporate 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 rehabilitative medicine, almost no studies in the humanities explicitly situate disability within a politicized, social constructionist

perspective.<sup>18</sup> 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 contents 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 intertwining 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 compensation 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 selfhood 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 culture's 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' aberrance and assured the onlookers that they were indeed "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 hirsute—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 Hevey calls "enfreakment"<sup>19</sup> 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 equality. 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 compensation model, in which disability is interpreted as a lack that must be compensated for by what I term the "benevolent 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 benefactress that these novels promote for women of the emerging middle class, who were marginal-

zed within the changing social order. The increasingly negative portrayals of disabled women figures in the genre move, from Stowe through Phelps compares an anxious subject that split, the disabled women and the benefactresses, paralleling the displacement of middle-class white women from meaningful work. This escalating reevaluation of the disabled figure tests the limits of domesticity's script of maternal benevolence as a solution to the problems of female roles in late-nineteenth-century America.

Chapter 5 discusses several twentieth-century, women-centered African-American liberatory novels that use the disabled figure and other extraordinary bodies to elaborate an identity that insists upon and celebrates physical difference. In these texts, the extraordinary body invokes a principle of difference over sameness that serves a postmodern politics that is nationalist rather than assimilationist. 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* tentatively 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 "biomythography" *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. I suggest that one rhetorical aim of these works is to establish a narrative of the particularized body as a site of politicized historical inscription instead of physical deviance. Disabled figures such as Morrison's Eva 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 implementation 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 singular 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 sentimental reform fiction, and these black women's liberatory novels all participate 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 disability through representation but also about the attendant political consequences.

## T W O



### *Theorizing Disability*

#### Feminist Theory, the Body, and the Disabled Figure

##### The Female Body and the Disabled Body

Many parallels exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies. Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority. Indeed, the disavowal equation of femaleness with disability is common, sometimes to denigrate women and sometimes to defend them. Examples abound, from Freud's delineating femaleness in terms of castration to late-nineteenth-century physicians' defining menstruation a disabling and restricting "eternal wound" to Thorstein Veblen's describing women in 1899 as literally disabled by feminine roles and costuming. Even feminists today invoke negative images of disability to describe the oppression of women: for example, Jane Flax asserts that women are "mutilated and deformed" by sexist ideology and practices.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the founding association of femaleness with disability occurs in the fourth book of *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle's discourse of the normal and the abnormal, in which he refines the Platonic concept of anatomies so that bodily variety translates into hierarchies of the typical and the aberrant. "[A]nyone who does not take after his parents," Aristotle asserts, "is really in a way a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type. The first beginning of this deviation is when a female is formed instead of a male." Here the philosopher, whom we might consider the found-

Barrami's "Amless Wonder" becomes *Beloved's* Nan, who imparts "sacred stories and dispense's nourishment. Morrison also transforms "The Amazing Fat-loved Woman" into Sethe and Sula, their flesh inscribed with mysterious, inscrutable signs of their uniqueness. And the exotic "Circassian Beauty" is in Morrison's novels the alluring Plate Dead, guiding men to a nationalist destiny. Julia Pastrana, dancing Peptias before her gawking audience in a grotesque parody of femininity, becomes Morrison's Baby Suggs, leading her renegade congregation in a sacred dance celebrating her extraordinary flesh. Finally, Lorde renders "The Hottentot Venus" as Audre/Zami: "fat," "black," "lesbian," and humanized by voice, subjectivity, community, agency, and sexuality—yet still fully corporeal and extraordinary in every sense.

## CONCLUSION

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### *From Pathology to Identity*

This book aspires to broaden and shift our current academic conversation about identity production and physical differences. While its primary aim has been to explore the ways culture represents and social practices construct disability, a related goal has been to highlight the role of the body in these representations and constructions. Introducing the idea of disability into discussions about constructions of the body demands confronting the relation between visible bodily particularity and identity. This requires neither ascribing categories of physical difference to a naive essentialism nor allowing constructionism to erase the materiality of the body. Instead, focusing on cultural representations of disability reveals a politics of appearance in which some traits, configurations, and functions become the stigmata of a vividly embodied inferiority or deviance, while others fade into a neutral, disembodied, universalized norm. Such readings of the body are the coordinates of a taxonomical system that distributes status, privilege, and material goods according to a hierarchy anchored by visible human physical variation.

Disability, of course, is not the sole somatic marker in this economy. Including disability in the discourses that constitute race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class complicates the body's cultural construction and acknowledges that all physical existence is inflected by multiple narratives of identity, felt or attributed, denigrated or privileged. By focusing on the intersections of the various systems that order and demarcate visible physical differences, I do not wish to suggest that identities are interchangeable—that gender and dis-

ability are synonymous, connecting, on that disability is a form of ethnicity. Rather, I propose that gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability are related products of the same social processes and practices that shape bodies according to ideological structures. What I have tried to uncover here are some of the complexities of these processes as they simultaneously make and interpret disability.

As I have suggested throughout this book, the disabled figure operates as a code for insufficiency, contingency, and abjection—for deviant particularity—thus establishing the contours of a canonical body that garners the prerogatives and privileges of a supposedly stable, universalized normalcy. The figure of the cultural self, then, in its refusal to be fleshed out, is the twin subject of this study. Moreover, within this cultural choreography the disabled body is a spectacle—sympathetic, grotesque, wondrous, or pathological—in a complex relation between seer and seen, between the opposing subject positions of the intensely embodied, reified, and silenced object and the abstract, unmarked, disembodied normate. I have attempted as well to historicize this dynamic between spectator and spectacle by examining the disabled figure in the context of American liberal individualism, the work ethic, and specific representational genre.

In analyzing three generic sites of disabled identity production—the freak show, sentimental fiction, and black women's liberatory novels—I hope to accomplish three things. First, I have tried to reveal how the interconnections among various forms of physical otherness operate in actual representations. My aim here is ultimately to demonstrate the fundamental complexity of social formations by historicizing and contextualizing those representations. In particular, I want to complicate any simple dichotomy of dominant and marginal social categories. For example, by considering the internal dynamics of otherness in texts that already claim a position outside dominant discourse, I hope to press our analyses beyond dualistic conceptions of identity and to discourage the current practice of balkanizing analytical categories in a kind of cultural and critical separatism in order to ensure legitimacy.

Second, the freak show, sentimental fiction, and black women's liberatory novels are genres in which the representation of disabled bodies is especially ambivalent and unstable. It is easy enough to chronicle the stereotypical uses of disability. Yet by focusing on the freak show's framing of the extraordinary body as at once wondrous and repellent, and on sentimentalism's combination of advocacy and repudiation, I intend to highlight further complexities in the relations between those who assume the normate subject position and those whose bodies are enlisted to define the borders of that identity. With this study, then, I not only expose the master narrative of physical disability as the

mark of embodied otherness, but I also unravel a counternarrative of physical difference as the mark of distinctive individual or collective history that interrogates the very definition of the ideal American self.

Finally, my assertion that black women's liberatory novels revise both the freak show's and sentimental fiction's ambivalent representations of disabled figures suggests a bias that I wish to acknowledge. While I have historicized my analysis of Morrison's and Lorde's uses of disabled figures by recognizing the post-civil rights impulse toward positive-identity politics in their celebratory portrayals of difference, I must confess that my own politics parallel these black women's attempts to render physical difference as distinction, uncoupled from modernity's devaluation of the atypical. This book imagines seeing disabled bodies in fresh ways: as extraordinary rather than abnormal. The rhetorical thrust of this book, then, is to critique the politics of appearance that governs our interpretation of physical difference, to suggest that disability requires accommodation rather than compensation, and to shift our conception of disability from pathology to identity.