Not Until I Stand Up: Framing a Disability Theory of Value for Contemporary Narrative

by

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the ways in which representations of disability in fiction, film, performance and media from the modernist period to the present reflect and resist dominant histories of ability, creating surplus moments of disabled agency and value. I employ disability theory, close reading and sociocultural analysis to address inequitable representations of disability across a range of high and pop cultural narratives, from an early novel of Samuel Beckett's to films that use CGI prosthetics. I use the term "sociotextual inequity" to identify moments when disability's employment and representation (as metaphor or aesthetic signifier) in cultural texts is disproportionate to the materiality of its lived histories and experiences. I then rematerialize such representations in order to generate more equitable understandings of disability in narrative and the larger social world from which they emerge, challenging the oppressive treatment and consumption of the disabled subject. My first chapter uses a critique of normative narratives of the institutionalization of the disabled subject to offer a paradigm shift on canonical readings of Beckett's Murphy (1938), valuing its material and metaphorical engagements with experiences of disability rather than romanticizing Beckett as author-genius. My second chapter considers two films, The Station Agent (2003) and Freaks (1932), contextualizing their representations of disability amidst past and present socioeconomic inequities in an industry that polices normalcy in ways that are then taken up by the dominant cultural imaginary. In chapter three I place in dialogue and dialectical tension Peter Handke’s language play Kaspar (1967), the historical autistic figure Kaspar Hauser, and disabled playwright John Belluso’s Voice Properties (2002) to reveal dominant stereotypes of disabled experience, and to reflect on alternate ways of communicating embodiment. My final chapter reconsiders theories, histories and materialities of prosthetics to interrogate their use in such pop-culture films as The Machine Girl (2008) and Planet Terror (2007). Examining these works alongside Flannery O'Connor’s classic short story “Good Country People” (1955), I question overdetermined meanings of the prosthesis in culture, and call for an ontological shift in the terms by which we read disabled embodiment and what it means to be whole.

Keywords: disability theory and studies; disability in literature, film, performance, media and art; disability culture and history; ablenationalism; sociotextual inequity; cultural value
For my dad, Gary William Ewart
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Introduction:

From the Margins to Full Frontal: Ma(r)king Spaces of Disability Theory

“[D]isability appears at first glance to be so individualizing that it overwhelms any sense of group identity, and without identity it is nearly impossible to project a future.” (Tobin Siebers, Disability Theory 188)

“Cultural history is the enemy of psychologizing and individuation.” (Harlan Lane, The Mask of Benevolence 82)

“I mean to say that a sentence is a monster.” (Kaspar 139)

In the Martin Scorsese film, The Wolf of Wall Street (2014), two lawyers for the brokerage firm Stratton Oakmont help Jordan Belfort (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Donnie Azoff (Jonah Hill) work through some “concerns” about tossing dwarves into a Velcro target (shown briefly early on) with a dollar sign for a bull’s-eye: “I’m going to throw the shit out of this little fuckin’ thing. So, if it gets hurt, what happens?” asks Jordan. “They have superhuman strength,” replies one of the lawyers. “You can’t look them right in the eyes, either” says Donnie, “they get confused and their wires get crossed.” “This is their gift, okay?” says the other lawyer, Rugrat (P.J. Byrne). “They’re built to be thrown like a lawn dart.” He eventually mentions a legal loophole: “If we don’t consider him a human, if we just consider it an act, I think we’re in the clear” (emphasis mine). Donnie’s biggest concern about employing dwarves as office entertainment, however, is that “these things gossip.” So keeping public perception of the brokerage in mind he suggests treating them like “one of us.” Very quickly, Jordan repeats the phrase, “one of us” and follows with the mantra from Tod Browning’s classic cult film Freaks, from over eighty years earlier, and which I discuss at greater length in chapter two. All repeat the phase as Jordan pounds his fists on the table, “Gooble, gobble, we accept you, one of us! One of us!”

The group’s dehumanizing banter also suggests dwarves be taken down with mace, taser or tranquilizer gun if “they” get out of control and reinforces the status of a dwarf as an objectified “it” several times. The scene justifies ableist, exploitive logic by aligning Browning’s film and its disabled actors with the morally bankrupt yet “successful” venture capitalists that The Wolf of Wall Street celebrates more than condemns. Doing so creates a new apparition of greedy monster made meaningful by
the at-times deliberate monstering of disability in *Freaks*. This disabled intertextuality contributes to the aggressive dehumanizing (as comedic relief) of disability in troubling social, cultural and experiential ways.

Understandably, much of *The Wolf of Wall Street*’s early criticism questions the film’s rationale of including dwarf tossing. Reasserting exploitation of disabled actors in film has repercussions beyond the screen. Dwarf actor and agent, Warwick Davis, who refuses to refer any of the actors he represents to dwarf-tossing or similar activities, hopes “the film doesn’t make people think it is glamorous to fling small people about” (*Starpulse*). In the article, “Wolf of Wall Street would be a greater film if it had lost the dwarf toss,” Josh Damman, who works in the dwarf entertainment industry, mentions that he doesn’t do any “nights or gigs where [he is] not in control of [his] own body” (*Herald Sun*). On Facebook, the advocacy group Little People of America posted a statement against including the scene in the film. Months before its release, they “sent a letter to Paramount Pictures and to the production companies of Martin Scorsese and Leonardo DiCaprio [. . .] co-signed by twenty disability, dwarfism, and civil rights organizations ask[ing] dwarf tossing be cut from the movie [because the act] reduces people of short stature to mere objects that exist solely for the entertainment of others” (LPA Statement). From loss of physical agency and fear of injury to deliberate objectification for entertainment value, with the potential of violence against dwarves to play out beyond the screen, such tensions reveal a range of what I call “sociotextual inequities.” I expose problems of disabled agency in this film and numerous other texts throughout my dissertation through a nuanced disability theory approach that involves close reading and its sociocultural applications to address inequitable representations and to advocate for more equitable discourses and practices in understanding the functions of disability and its associative experiences in narrative, as well as the larger social world from which they emerge—and to which they can be applied.

*The Wolf of Wall Street*’s scriptwriter, Terence Winter’s, observation of the above scene reinforces ableist perspectives of mainstream entertainment and its creators. He wonders – within the logic of the film – how the deliberating group will deal with “these people” and, though he mentions that “ridiculous stereotypes” are in play, he lauds the improvised acting style of Jonah Hill in particular and his don’t-look-a-dwarf-directly-in-the-eye scene as “comedy gold” (*Media Mayhem*). While the LPA acknowledges this stereotypical, oppressive activity figures into the 2007 memoir of 1980/90s Wall Street broker and convicted fraudster, Jordan Belfort, upon which the film is based, they cite a
2011 assault against UK dwarf actor Martin Henderson (which I discuss in chapter two) as proof that the degrading scenes threaten their community. The production companies’ motivation for the scene’s inclusion in the film – whether “authentic” to Belfort’s memoir or not – maintains a problematic acceptance of violence against disabled people. While remnants of the contentious scene appear in Belfort’s 2007 book, a quick examination of the text that “inspires” the film reveals very little “comedy gold.” He writes,

I couldn't help but wonder if I should've allowed Danny to bring a midget into the office. After all, what was so wrong with it? It sounded a bit off at first, but now that I’d had a little time to digest it, it didn’t seem so bad. In essence, what it really boiled down to was that the right to pick up a midget and toss him around was just another currency due any mighty warrior, a spoil of war, so to speak. (104)

Belfort’s consistent objectification of “a midget” – with some essentialism for support – nonchalantly justifies his actions as a form of disturbing biopolitical, economic conquest. In a very clear way, he illustrates how capital reinforces or sanctions valuation of one body over another. He later suggests that he’ll possess a “moral credit” for doing nice things with his money when he’s older (105). Here, Belfort’s oppressive logic mirrors the establishment, motive and maintenance of the charity system in some respects,\(^1\) and combined with his discounting of disabled experience encompasses much of the dominant social, political, cultural and economic agency that disability theory and, more specifically, an analysis and critique of sociotextual inequity seeks to undo.

The title of this dissertation hints at my own experiences with cerebral palsy in terms of becoming noticeably different (and often answering a question or two) from others when standing and/or walking. Throughout my project, I wish to assert the value of disabled embodiments and the importance of not hiding them. This introduction sets out an accessible genealogy of disability studies/theory to engage questions of how disability theory might read and write the body not only as metaphor, prosthetic, or as signifier/enabler of something else, but also, more importantly, as a promising, continual textual ontology of interdependence, creative experience and interdisciplinarity. In doing so, I hope to offer a generative study of disability, its representations, tensions and

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\(^1\) In recent presentation at Liverpool Hope University’s Avoidance and/in the Academy International Conference on Disability Culture and Education, Peter Wheeler outlined the way a UK school for the blind and the piano tuner’s trade were largely maintained by slave traders who felt that “sharing the wealth” they earned from the oppression of slaves and keeping workers in poor conditions was a form of pittance or retribution for their sins that would “buy” them entry to heaven (“Does the social model of disability represent a paradigmatic shift in understanding in the education and training of disabled people?”).
capabilities. Like my introduction, my dissertation chapters share a range of works that feature disability and associative socio-historical experiences surrounding policy and consumption of the disabled subject – from later modernisms of Beckett to contemporary films that use CGI prosthetics – to expose what I call sociotextual inequity, or moments where disability’s employment and representation in texts is materially disproportionate to its histories and experiences.

Giving dimension to disabilities beyond – and because of – their problematic representations calls for reconsideration of who populates and motivates the texts we consume and what we turn into cultural and teachable capital in relation to those who might identify as disabled. How do such correlations reinforce and resist dominant normative cultural perceptions, expectations, values and materials? How do various sociohistorical and ideological constructions (such as normalcy, heteronormativity, etc.) shape our narratives and our relationships to them? Whether widely consumed or seldom seen, disability, in addition to signifying the joke, horror, lack, tragedy, genius or inspiration is symptomatic of new, much needed discourse in the humanities about what else humanity embodies within its fiction(s), and without.

For example, how might we read Aldous Huxley’s genetically determined seemingly dystopic *Brave New World* amidst then contemporary, still continual eugenic demands of normalcy and ability? If we revalue disability not in opposition to normal, but rather as a continuum of varied embodiments and experiences, then people with mental and physical differences expose corrective imperatives\(^2\) as a form of cultural oppression. Like Belfort above, Huxley’s valuation of some bodies over other bodies insists upon a binaristic, hierarchical understanding of power and ability, with dire repercussions.

Shortly after the publication of his now “seminal” text, Huxley declared:

> What is the remedy for the present deplorable state of affairs? It consists, obviously, in encouraging the normal and super-normal members of the population to have larger families and in preventing the sub-normal from having any families at all. (qtd. in Childs 12)

Disability studies/theory revisits and repopulates history with a more inclusive social body – flaws and all. As the image by Heinrich Hoerle that appeared on the 1977 Panther edition of Huxley’s novel shows (see below), disability revitalizes now aging ideas of avant-garde and other “modern” artistic movements to become, in Tobin Siebers’, crucial in understanding “an aesthetic tradition increasingly preoccupied with disability” (10).

\(^2\) “2,845 Canadians were sterilized by the Alberta Eugenics Board between 1929 and 1972” (Childs 16).
My brief tug upon the image production line of literary and cultural history here serves as a late modernist reminder of (and beginning to) how and why my study seeks to reclaim spaces of non-normative embodiment – spaces where performances of normalcy and (re)productivity seldom “measure up” to the myths and values inherent in the constructions they reflect. In doing so, our cultural imaginary and social practices might continue to claim disability’s cultural significance without the disavowal of its people. Huxley’s use of disability as caveat in a technologically based cautionary tale of societal and physical idealism supposes no other reading than fear and error.

Medical, social and cultural models of disability help contextualize moments of disability history along with its construction through transhistorical ideas of normalcy and ableism. This introduction establishes connections to various genres, fields and now-established minority discourses, including race, feminist, queer and other studies. Although, not “new” relative to global and local histories of marginalization, overt signification, and state sanctioned eradication, in some ways disability occupies an ideal neoliberal, contemporary subject position. Given the shifts from a “modern” economy of production to the present dominant mode of consumption, disability emerges in discussions around ablenationalism(s) and ideas of non-productive labour power. Even with greater “use,” the often perilous, silent histories and lack of sociopolitical space and agency of disability relative to its mass employment and symbolic weight as cultural material creates what I term “sociotextual inequity.” This concept becomes a useful model to articulate and illustrate a range of able, and increasingly socioeconomic imperatives that govern disability within and outside of our cultural material. In other words, sociotextual inequity illuminates moments where disability’s employment and representation in texts fails to consider the material histories, contemporary experiences and exclusions of disability. Doing so provides a theoretical framework to call for

Heinrich Hoerle’s “Monument to the Unknown Prostheses” (1930) appears on the cover of the 1977 Panther edition of Huxley’s Brave New World.
equitable representation and empowerment and ensure those who identify with and experience disability are valuable and valued in our human narratives and/as experience.

In order to illustrate sociotextual inequity (the specific chapter-by-chapter applications of which I discuss at the end of this introduction) more clearly, I return to the problematic humour around dwarf-tossing in *The Wolf of Wall Street*. That scene’s closure with the invocation of *Freaks*’ iconic “one of us” chant has equitable possibilities for disabled actors on film in general if their one-dimensional roles are given opportunities to actually be like one of the hedonistic criminal investors from the 90s that the film privileges. From a dominant cultural perspective, that dwarf actors cannot be imagined this way in this film, or arguably in lived experience beyond the screen, is a socially and textually inequitable position. Perhaps, given the scale of Scorsese’s audience, a new generation of viewers may seek out Browning’s film to appreciate the normative instability the original “dinner scene” creates for viewers, as well as its featuring of disabled sideshow and circus performers of the day beyond the status of props. Conversely, several of Peter Dinklage’s roles (which I also discuss in chapter two) help to diminish the disabled/abled binary and help to change ideas of embodiment in popular culture.

Undoubtedly, disability discourse owes/owns its at-times-uneasy place at the theoretical table by building upon and borrowing from the concepts and achievements of other minority discourses – often in intertextual and inter-theoretical ways. W.E.B. Du Bois’ notion of double consciousness as Black and as American informs Mitchell and Snyder’s “double bind of disability” as marginal yet appropriated bodies (*The Body and Physical Difference* 6); Judith Butler’s discussions of gender as a sociocultural performance continue to inform ideas of embodiment as performance. Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor* offers historical and contemporary models of how disease (TB, AIDS) as dis-ease (romanticized, war-worthy plague) figures into language at a cultural level to shape cultural uptakes of illness and treatment. Disability and performance theorist Carrie Sandahl notes:

> As the interdisciplinary field of disability studies develops its own theoretical paradigms, it necessarily borrows from various sources. Such borrowing means

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3 In her article “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” Garland-Thomson writes: “Disability studies is news, but feminist theory is not. Nevertheless, feminist theory is still resisted for exactly the same reasons that scholars might resist disability studies: the assumption that it is narrow, particular and has little to do with the mainstream of academic practice and knowledge (or with themselves)” (2).
that disability scholars have not had to reinvent the wheel but have been able to build on the conceptual foundations of identity-based theories that have grown out of other interdisciplinary fields, such as gender studies and critical race studies. But disability studies offers as much to its predecessors as it borrows from them. (“Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?” 24)

Minority discourse in the humanities necessitates interdisciplinary exchange as a means of survival, especially when we consider the seemingly perpetual economic imperatives guiding much of our culture. An introspective lens upon the varied embodiments and spaces disability occupies helps populate its often oppressed, ignored experience and allows for celebratory possibilities, certainly invoking the need for, as Catherine Kudlick writes, “this new Other” (763). Although not “new” relative to global and local histories of marginalization, in some ways, as I will discuss here and in my dissertation, disability operates in subtle, saleable ways. Those who identify as disabled or “pass” as able-bodied comprise the world’s largest minority\(^4\) and, given enough time, disability can happen to you.

Medical, social and cultural models shape disability discourse and, much like Margrit Shildrick’s definition of disabled embodiment as “slippery, fluid, heterogeneous, deeply intersectional, and thus resistant to definition” (4), each model informs and creates tensions and achievements with the others historically and textually. Although not exclusively, the medical (with its primary onus being the pathology and correction of the individual\(^5\)), social (with ideas that society creates disability via inaccessible environments and correlative attitudes towards disabled embodiment), and cultural (which considers disability in a range of cultural forms and as a celebratory culture in its own right) models contribute to a more dimensional understanding of disability studies.

Building upon a sociocultural model of discourse, my work privileges an experiential model that is inclusive of lived disability experience. Doing so allows a greater consideration of how economics and place shape – and oppress – disability histories. By examining social, textual and historical inequities around the employment and/or representation of disability in/as cultural material, my goal is to set out an empowering model of disability. With this approach, the rightfully maligned medical/pathological models can be revalued when used in concert with sociocultural and historical reconsiderations. For example, my advocacy for material, experiential readings of

\(^4\) Davis estimates 15 to 25% of a given population depending upon geographical location (Bending over Backwards 15).

\(^5\) Georges Canguilhem’s The Normal and the Pathological (1943) is significant in terms of mapping the historical disappearance of medical objectivity in relation to non-normative bodies.
Samuel Beckett’s characters, more specifically in his first novel, *Murphy*, involves both a direct critique of institutionalizing people with cognitive or physical disorders while also considering how Beckett’s own experiences of disability shape better possibilities within that problematic system. Interrogating the metaphorical everyman status of his characters’ in dominant criticism helps locate important representations, experiences and inequitable histories of disability. For example, Beckett’s severe anxieties and his mother’s Parkinson’s are too-often subsumed as byproduct of his authorial genius function rather than as a record of disabled experience.

My dissertation borrows from key disability theorists Lennard Davis, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Harlan Lane, Robert McRuer, Simi Linton, Michael Davidson, Tobin Siebers, Ato Quayson, Susan Wendell and others to help situate what disability theory actually does. Their collective call to embrace (rather than efface) the experiences of disability on and beyond the page, stage and screen challenges a range of problematic and promising narratives as well as troubling ideologies such as normalcy, eugenics and ableism. Postcolonial/disability theorist Ato Quayson reminds us “[in] using disability to open up the possibility of close reading, I hope to encourage us to lift our eyes from the reading of literature to attend more closely to the implications of the social universe around us” (31) – even for those of us who, presumably, do not use our eyes to read.

**Thanks for the Parking Space: What Makes Disabilities Work?**

It is impossible to discuss why and how disability theory operates without first contextualizing the ideologies and constructions it works against and within. Quayson’s call to notice and respond to the “implications” of our surroundings beyond texts implies attending to the improvement of material conditions of people who identify as disabled, along with the social, economic, political and cultural ‘figurations’ and ideas surrounding

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6 In her text *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, Simi Linton suggests that “the construction of the terms ableist and ableism . . . can be used to organize ideas about the centering and domination of the nondisabled experience and point of view” (9). These terms also signify an ideology which posits people with disabilities as inferior to those without disabilities.

7 In “Disability and the Double Bind of Representation,” Mitchell and Snyder provide a definition of disability from *Explanation of the Contents of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990* (M. Golden et al.): (1) the impairment of a major life function, (2) an official diagnostic record that identifies a history of an individual’s impairment; and (3) a trait or characteristic that results in the
disability. The theoretical discourse of disabled and able-bodied8 “allies” (Oliver 166) provides spaces to excavate, reclaim and repopulate histories seeking disability’s oppression and erasure. Such theory also considers how textual representations and narratives work beyond the figurative. In other words, disability theory recommends and advocates interdependence, inclusivity and equitability – whether a disabled screen actors guild or a disability art conference9 – in discussion and practice, especially as an emergent10 discourse.

So what, exactly, is disability up against? Putting the often empty, oxymoronic notion of “equal access” aside, let me telescope back over two thousand years to pick up a thread of the since-dominant perception of disability as less-than-human in western thought. In their text, Embodied Rhetorics, James Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson note that Aristotle, in addition to declaring the “female state as being as it were a deformity,” delineates children born with deformities as “no longer ha[ving] the appearance of a human being at all, but that of an animal only” (13). While unwittingly aligning the now emerging field of disability and animal studies, such claims from the father of rhetorical analysis and devisor of binaries and norms in creative disciplines present a “logical” hierarchy replete with pathos, but wrapped up in an ethos of intelligence, for non-typical embodiment.11 In his instructive book, The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community, psychologist Harlan Lane (whom I will

stigmatization of the individual as limited or incapacitated” (2). Mitchell and Snyder suggest that “Such an expansive definition identifies the terms disability and disabled as denoting more than a medical condition or essentialized ‘deformity’ or difference, [u]nlike the terms handicapped or crippled which suggest inherent biological limitations and individual abnormalities” (2). Section 15.1 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) adds the hard-fought inclusion of disability onto the end of a list of apparent difference indicators – seemingly providing and defining equality for all. It states, “Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.”

8 Or as some people in the disability studies community refer to the “abled” among us, “TABS” or, temporarily able-bodied.

9 Portland State University spring, 2011.

10 Raymond Williams states, “By ‘emergent’ I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created. But it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture . . . and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it” (123).

11 Non-typical bodies also hold values beyond their corporeality. Mitchell and Snyder consider Sophocles’ Oedipus and his “paradigm[atic]” role for reading disability. His significant limp (caused post-birth) and subsequent self-induced blindness make him a “lame interpreter” of the Gods’ will to illustrate “the ability of dramatic myth to bridge public and private symbology” (Narrative Prosthesis 62).
return to momentarily) notes Erving Goffman’s updated version of ideal embodiment, which – in spite of the passage of millennia – still persists along several Aristotelian lines. Goffman writes of “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” (qtd. in Lane 7). Stereotyping the pseudo-mythic (but also very real) privileges of the white, heterosexual, educated able-bodied male, arguably, as a non-stigmatized ontology not only invites its deconstruction but also reinforces its hegemony. The key, for Goffman at least, is that “the presentation of self in everyday life” arrives as a persona. But why is this cereal box image so normative? Or, put another way, why do so many social commentators aspire to such apparently unflinching imagery?

The space and time between the maligned deformed child of ancient Greece and the ideal unblushing “normate”\(^\text{12}\) Goffman envisions for middle-America of the 1950s\(^\text{13}\) and early 60s provides innumerable moments\(^\text{14}\) to pick up the often dehumanizing and productive thread of disability amidst ‘normalcy’ – from visitors to the spectacle of patients in London’s Bedlam Hospital centuries before Shakespeare’s time to Pieter Brueghel’s depictions of urban disability and poverty in The Battle Between Carnival and Lent (1559). Contemporary disability discourse works to undo perspectives and constructions of normalcy that reinforce ableism and sanction the medical model of “fixing” disability. Arriving with the industrial revolution, coinciding with the eugenics movement on both sides of the Atlantic, and culminating in part with the disturbing success of “Nazi death camps [which] killed between 100,000 and 125,000 German citizens with disabilities” (Mitchell and Snyder, The Body and Physical Difference 21), this comparatively recent history certainly provides enough biopolitical material to create

\(^\text{12}\) Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body delineates the concept of “normate” as a subject position “outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries” (8).

\(^\text{13}\) Pathos follows disabled children throughout history. The 1950s brings the telethon into North American living rooms as a means to humanize and cure disability with a financial/moral prosthesis of “goodwill.” For further reading consult Paul Longmore’s “Conspicuous Contribution and American Cultural Dilemmas: Telethon Rituals of Cleansing and Renewal” and Ellen L. Barton’s “Textual Practices of Erasure: Representations of Disability and the Founding of the United Way.”

\(^\text{14}\) Henri-Jacques Stiker’s A History of Disability offers a valuable resource that traces disability’s instructional roles in and in spite of society from antiquity through Biblical, Medieval, Renaissance and Modern eras. As David Mitchell suggests, Stiker “provides neither a reassuring progressive trajectory nor a flat notion of negative and positive imagery. Instead, his work situates itself as a challenge to our own cultural progress narratives and political sophistication” (vii).
and maintain “sporting” aspirations for a cultural imaginary’s ideal ontology, and plenty for disability studies to guard against.

In his essay “Bodies of Difference: Politics, Disability, and Representation,” Lennard Davis\(^\text{15}\) outlines the discursive inscription of normalcy in western society. He writes: “the word *normal* appeared in English only about 150 years ago,” which coincides roughly with the development of statistics and the bell curve – previously called, as Davis notes, “the normal curve.” He writes:

> the majority of bodies fall under the main umbrella of the curve [and] those who do not are . . . abnormal. Thus, there is an imperative placed on people to conform, to fit in, under the rubric of normality. [P]eople in the last one hundred and fifty years have been encouraged to strive to be normal, to huddle under the main part of the curve. (100-101)

This process simultaneously invents the concept of the abnormal as synonymous with disability. Within the same context, one of the first contemporary interpolations of the term “disabled” occurs with Karl Marx, in reference to injured workers unable to perform a “normal” day’s labour. Indeed, Marx’s caveat of industrialization creating “crippled monstrosit[ies]” (*Capital*, Ch. 14) suggests the bell’s yoke might never loosen, or that the curve of its predictable crown will turn inclusive. But such a mechanically determined ideology seems a little rusty and riddled with double standards around value. After all, can we be too smart, too strong or too rich?

Francis Galton – coiner of the term “eugenics” and cousin of Charles Darwin – made a device (see below) that uses gravity, pellets and pegs to generate bell curve distributions and to literally (and figuratively) design normalcy. Resembling what I term a “biopolitical pachinko machine,” the values inherent in such abstractions gain perilous significance as pellets become people and/or their desirable or undesirable traits. As Snyder and Mitchell note, “Darwin generally distrusted the efficacy of human interventions to control the process and direction of species variation.”

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\(^{15}\) Davis’s *Disability Studies Reader* is now in its fourth edition.
His cousin, however, a saltationist, did not, and sought “strenuous breeding practices that would encourage desirable characteristics while discouraging undesirable qualities” (*Cultural Locations* 25). The notion of *ablenationalism* (which I discuss throughout my dissertation) as it relates to disability histories and presents is also an emerging focus of the field and asks, in part, how state-sanctioned exclusions, sterilizations and devaluations of people on the basis of skin colour, nationality, addiction and other ‘anomalous types’ or behaviours come to occupy an unacceptable sociocultural space.

If, as Davis suggests, disability signifies the space “the body must not occupy” (“Nude Venuses” 68), and for Tobin Siebers aspects of public design indicate that the social body/body politic is an able one (see *Disability Aesthetics*), then what spaces are left for so many people to inhabit or create? The eugenic imperative to limit “social unworthiness . . . associated with ethnic minorities and immigrant populations such as Eastern Europeans and Blacks in North America, Jews in Germany and Roma in Sweden” (Alemdaroğlu 129) is certainly part of a global normalizing continuum informing the present day, just as the increase in pre-natal screening and ‘designer babies’ confirms that eugenics is not a “momentary aberration in the history of disability science” (Snyder and Mitchell 26). Removing disabled experiences from culture through an unproductive worker scenario or through promotion of disability as a marker of undesirability or deviance motivates disability theorists to protect and project disability culture in all its forms to deter “wider cultural efforts to cordon off disability from the continuum of human embodiment” (5). Writer/activist Simi Linton concurs that disability studies and rights invest in and are “critical of the domination of the medical definition” (*Claiming Disability* 225) and, by extension, the larger social imperative to validate medical intervention and rehabilitation of disabilities.

Harlan Lane’s narrative of advocacy for deaf communities illustrates the importance of the cultural model of disability to bring together what I have discussed so far. Lane situates “the medicalization of cultural deafness [as] promoted by the eugenics movement” (213) as a ‘logical’ lead up to the USDA’s approval in 1990 of the “bionic ear” cochlear implant for “surgical insertion in deaf children over the age of two” (3). While

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16 Mitchell and Snyder and other contributors (including myself) discuss various implications and possibilities of this term in *JLCDS* 4.2 (2010).

17 Not surprisingly, considering disability’s often-marginalized identities, many in the deaf community identify as non-disabled though they share similar oppressions.

18 In a disturbing revision of ableist history Lane criticizes the cochlear implant industry in vivid bodily terms. He writes, “The exquisitely detailed microstructure of the inner ear is often ripped
corrective surgery for children is not inherently negative or oppressive, there is an assumption that alternatives do not exist. Lane’s work traces socio-normative, ableist structures of power that stem from the rise of eugenics, noting Alexander Graham Bell as the “most renowned . . . audist” of the early twentieth century. Whether Bell’s desire to “eliminat[e]” deaf as well as blind populations “from the human stock” (215) motivated his eventual technological contributions to an audible society, his influence helps establish the erasure of deaf culture as acceptable to those outside the non-hearing community. The achievements of student protests during the “Gallaudet Revolution” of 1988 – when many at the predominately deaf university disagreed with another instillation of a non-deaf president – offer a positive outcome in spite of much history suggesting otherwise. Although the situation was problematic to begin with, insofar as every president and the vast majority of the school’s board had always been non-deaf, results of the action also institute a form of exclusion based upon one’s ability and identity. Lane’s materialization of oppressed deaf culture and history provides a useful model of forcefully attending to inequities of disability to ensure they do not reoccur.

**Don’t Park in My Space: My Minority Identity is Better Than Your Minority Identity**

Having established some of what disability studies and theory resists and investigates – from the systemic pathologization of people based on bodily or cognitive differences to how a ‘marked’ culture can push back against ableism’s control, erasure and objectification — I will now bring attention to productive theoretical moves for/in the humanities in order to foreground my dissertation’s discussions of disability’s innovative representations and embodiments in narratives of literature, film, visual art, performance and the media. Doing so requires addressing a few tensions around the appropriation of disability (or, disappropriation) within and beyond its field(s) to situate a productive methodology for, hopefully, many.

19 The “Deaf President Now” movement was so successful that many in the US government took notice and responded in part – ironically – by building a hospital for the deaf.

20 I. King Jordan became the university’s first deaf president since its inception in 1864.
In her text *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, Susan Wendell critiques the employment of representations without consideration of the contexts of power and resistance in which they are produced and without due consideration of experiences – such as pain and suffering – in discourses of the body and disability. She writes:

> I believe that culture plays a central role in constructing (or not constructing) disability. However, I want to distinguish this view from approaches to cultural construction of ‘the body’ that seem to confuse the lived reality of bodies with cultural discourse about and representations of bodies, or that deny or ignore bodily experience in favour of fascination with bodily representations [. . .] I do not think my body is a cultural representation, although I recognize that my experience of it is both highly interpreted and very influenced by cultural (including medical) representations. (44)

Wendell’s concerns about her own *dis*appropriation21 as a cultural signifier of disability are central to the enigmatic, phenomenological, spaces such bodies and discussions of/around them attempt to reconcile. Thinking of disability as “between binary pairs” (Grosz, qtd. in Weinstock, 327) reaffirms Shildrick’s “slippery” ontological designation for disability and reflects Wendell’s reservations of being an object of investigation and a subject for discussion whether she approves of it or not. Wendell’s reflections also echo the strains of ‘how best to define and discuss an identity,’22 and of what to be more aware and inclusive. While I do not agree that one needs to read Lane’s book to consider the problematic, productive and at times supernatural representations at work in any episode of *Sue Thomas: F.B.Eye*,23 his text should be requisite for those in any

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21 Wendell’s text shares her experiences with ME/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.

22 One of the more surprising revelations in my research involves the development of the “social model” (Oliver) of disability in the late 1970s-early 80s, which establishes the problematic concept of ‘disability’ as a social construction and ‘impairment’ as a medical one. Tom Shakespeare and others believe the strict ‘social model’ does little to include the various lived conditions and real experiences of disability.

23 The show (2002-2005) stars Deanne Bray – a deaf actress – and is modeled on the experiences of a deaf F.B.I. agent.
field who use cultural materials of disability to support their work. Doing so allows for considerations beyond the representational plane, and advocates a bottom up approach. Queer/Disability theorist Robert McRuer cautions against the idea and practice of disability – with oppressive histories like I have discussed in full view – as an “exhaustible research machine” (*Crip Theory* 187) and has no hesitation offering his allegiance by declaring “I have no choice but to take the decided risk of speaking for others” (“We Were Never Identified” 315). Such implications of presuming agency highlight multivalent subject positions as both problem and potential for the materiality of disability, and for seeking power beyond representation while also learning from its forms of appearance, exclusions and rights to express experiences or not.

By appropriating a maxim of disability activism—“nothing about us without us” (Charlton) – in a literary manner, I believe issues around disability (at least from a sociological perspective), as cultural material without corporeal considerations, when applied to literary narratives becomes _metaphors about people without people_. Quayson again suggests, quite carefully, that literature has its limits:

> there is no doubt that literary representation of disability somewhat subtends real-life treatment of disabled people in variety of ways. However, I also want to note that the aesthetic nervousness of the literary-aesthetic domain cannot by any means be said to be equivalent to the responses to disabled persons in reality. To say that the literary model provides an analogue to reality does not mean that it is the same as that reality. The epistemological effect of representation is quite different from the emotional effects of misunderstanding and stereotyping in the real world. (30)

Quayson illustrates the importance of conceptualizing how representations of disability can operate as crises, while also providing a way to negotiate Wendell’s concerns about her *dematerialization* in most hegemonic cultural contexts. Quayson delineates text/life while acknowledging the cultural affect such representations can project.

Davis’s declaration of disability as “the end of identity politics” (9), while exclusive or totalizing, also destabilizes the notion of identity as fixed. In *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions*, he suggests one of the problems disability has in relation to other identities arises because of its unstable “mutability” in comparison to linguistic, racial or sexual minorities, and he questions, for example, the next-identity-in-line approach to the study of disability in university. As such, he argues disability ushers in a “dismodern” era of identity able to accommodate other identities and future bodies to declare, “difference is what we all have in common” (26). Is Davis’s neoliberal-sounding construct possible? Is the “normate” (Garland-Thomson) under
threat here? The concept of someone shoring up his or her “boundaries” amidst identities and bodies with no boundaries, however, also reveals normalcy’s constructed status.

Following from a first-wave of disability studies that addresses rights’ issues, terms and debates in the field – of which accessibility activism of the sort outlined by Lane forms a considerable part – a second-wave disability discourse moves in a complementary and reciprocal way from rights and access to culture and community. Interdisciplinarity helps shape the field by unifying oppressions and opportunities in diverse ways – from McRuer’s work with queering crip culture, to Sandahl’s (and others’) theorizing of disability and performance, Nirmala Erevelles’ discussions of race and disability, and my own (and others’) work around the biopolitical connections between disability, geopolitics and diaspora. The term disability is vague and inadequate as definitive ideology/identity/ontology; however, it also provides stability and agency to a range of people, cultures and histories.

Tobin Siebers emphasizes the stability of disability as a category, especially in terms of its perpetual importance in the creation of art as subject, material, medium and object. Further, by expanding upon ideas of disability as a social construction, it could be argued that disability’s stability (even as a shifting locus of ontology) exists relative to the near-constant shifts and uncertainties in social/spatial relationships – whether through architecture or its socioeconomically driven policies (and failures thereof). Not that I am advocating the negation of the individuality of disabled experience and its intersections with other marginalized identities and cultures; fragmenting the (imagined) whole (as a postmodernist claim, for example) does little to address the lack of cultural and literary disability studies discourse at the university level in Canada.

Not surprisingly, some criticism of Davis’s positionality arrives from the disability studies community. McRuer, who often brings together multiple minority subjectivities in his work – in a somewhat ironic move, and perhaps without oppressive histories in full

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24 In a telling *Family Guy* scene from “No Legs, No Service,” Peter views Joe and his community of wheelchair users as a threat to business and as an embodiment of minority stereotypes. Peter crafts a new sign that reads, “NO SHIRT, NO SHOES, NO LEGS, NO SERVICE” to shore up his normative space.

25 One of the more surprising revelations in my research involves the development of the “social model” (Oliver) of disability in the late 1970s-early 80s, which establishes the problematic concept of ‘disability’ as a social construction and ‘impairment’ as a medical one. Tom Shakespeare and others believe the strict ‘social model’ does little to include the various lived conditions and real experiences of disability.

26 A quick count, excluding departments of medicine and social work and management, reveals three.
view – calls out dismodernism as a form of “colonization” of other minority discourses. He states “if a disabled world is achieved through trumping and transcending it is hard not to perceive the projected moves as colonialist” (“We Were Never Identified” 314). At the same time, McRuer does concede feminist and queer “identities were being formed even as they were being deconstructed” (315), which in some ways is what Davis is doing with disability. Siebers offers useful context in this regard, suggesting “Disability marks the last frontier of unquestioned inferiority because the preference for able-bodiedness makes it extremely difficult to embrace disabled people and to recognize their unnecessary and violent exclusion from society” (Disability Theory 6). So, although defined as an identity in relief, in a negative sense along the lines of “the space the body must not occupy” (Davis), disability’s “aspirations” might simply entail getting out of the bathtub without injury rather than sailing oceans to raid “foreign” lands. As Quayson confirms in Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation, as disability uneasily disrupts “dominant protocols of representation” (15), colonialism “displaces” disability discourse “onto a discourse of otherness . . . correlated to racial difference” (10). In other words, similar to how ablenationalism might exclude and/or necessitate a shift in identity, the colonial body also occupies disabled spaces. If such a relationship holds, as invader and occupier of other fields and histories, disability studies still has work to do to include those who also align with other identities along with disability.27

**This Sure is a Freaky After-School-Special: What Else Does Disability Theory Do?**

How disability studies/theory can help repopulate oppressive narratives seeking disability’s erasure (recall the work of Lane writing about the disabling of deaf communities) also shows that some contention exists between how representations perform and occupy comparatively unique but potentially collective identities. A sociotextual inequity perspective relies on cultural texts’ ability to spur (and maintain) agency in theory and community. Considering that roughly thirty “years ago there was no

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27 Chris Bell’s paper “Is Disability Studies Actually White Disability Studies?” (Disability Studies Reader 374-86) argues more should be done to engage with race and ethnicity in the predominantly white field. My own work includes discussions of global and diasporic bodies and disability in Dionne Brand’s novel What we All Long For and Stephen Frears’s film Dirty Pretty Things.
such thing as disability studies” (Barton, Oliver 12), and as its legitimacy persists, how might a text help define, or perhaps unite a field?

Tod Browning’s 1932 film *Freaks* provided material for many emerging disability scholars during the 1990s, and continues to inform discussions of how language can mark and empower marginalized groups. Browning’s innovative representations of disability – and of normalcy – disrupt notions of able-bodied stability and control over the disabled “other,” eventually presenting the disabled characters as a vengeful spectacle, but also as a community capable of autonomy. The film also features freak show performers and disabled actors of the day – a move Hollywood has since shied away from. Browning’s productive and problematic film and its performances in part represent a then-waning and now non-existent circus-freak sideshow. In the 1960s, *Freaks* garnered cult-status, and was shown in many universities and independent movie houses (Skal, Commentary), and this resurgence of the film was largely due to the redesigation of the term *freak* with the rise of the counter-culture in North America. Such a process also wrests the language of control and “othering” from would-be oppressors and allows for its use by those who are marked by it – even as or if it retains oppressive contexts. As I discuss in chapter two, *Freaks* provides a textual model of disability agency and normative/disabled tension that resonates with and resolves in some ways Peter Dinklage’s starring role as romantic lead in *The Station Agent*.

Language informs, defines and provides agency. Simi Linton discusses the transgressive potential of oppressive terms such as cripple, gimp and freak as a means to control her right to “name experience” (17). The contemporary applications of *crip*, *crip power* and *cripping* work analogously with this important breach in the hegemony of the normal – and help expose its constructions. Sandahl provides an excellent definition of

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28 Lennard Davis’s “Crips Strike Back: The Rise of Disability Studies” refers to several foundational texts leading toward disability theory as well as key *Freaks*-related articles/texts – also see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s genre-building *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* for a range of essays around the exploitation and fascination of freakish bodies.

29 In one scene from the film, Browning deliberately modifies the setting to accommodate the statures of Hans and Frieda, and establishes perceptions of disability as normative.

30 Browning did so well (financially) with *Dracula*, his studio gave him free reign with *Freaks*. After considerably unfavorable audience reception, he had difficulty making subsequent films.

31 Garland-Thomson mentions “the Turtle Boy, the Mule-Faced Woman, Serpentina, the Camel Girl, the Dog-Faced Boy, the Bear Woman, the Lobster Boy, the Lion Woman, the Alligator Man, and Sealo [are] bodies whose forms appeared to transgress rigid social categories such as race, gender, and personhood were particularly good grist for the freak mill” (5).
how this process and motivation empowers in conjunction with queer minority discourse, suggesting,

members of both groups have developed a wry critique of hegemonic norms. In queer communities, the application of this critique has been given its own verb: to queer. Queering describes the practices of putting a spin on mainstream representations to reveal latent queer subtexts; of appropriating a representation for one’s own purposes, forcing it to signify differently; or of deconstructing a representation’s heterosexism. Similarly, some disabled people practice “cripping.” Crippling spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects. (30)

McRuer’s Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability builds upon the potential of crip/queer identities, whether via physical risks of L.A. gang life (64), or by exposing how Wal-Mart turns discriminatory hiring practices into advertisements of inclusivity (204-5).32 For McRuer the transgressive potential of language as acts and identities operates globally as much as it marks individuals. By “welcoming the disability to come” (208) he advocates a democratic approach to the field while calling out the choice-less assertions of our ableist, homo-normative society:

[Such a] culture . . . assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively are aiming for. A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather be more like me? (“Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence” 93)

Here, disabled and/or queer subject positions are at times impossible to maintain in our cultural narratives. McRuer’s discussion of As Good as it Gets33 – starring Jack Nicholson as obsessive-compulsive writer Melvin Udall, Helen Hunt as waitress Carol Connelly and Greg Kinnear as gay artist Simon Bishop – follows a “trajectory toward able-bodied heterosexuality” (94), in order to “resolv[e] or alleviat[e] cris[es] and anxieties” (95) invoked by the film’s crip/queer representations. Understanding the direction of the film renders many seeming impossibilities possible. How does a crotchety old man who avoids stepping on sidewalk cracks at every turn get together

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32 He notes the illegal non-hiring of two deaf employees in spite of several US advertisements showing disability-at-work in Wal-Mart’s aisles.

33 For greater analysis of how the film “crystallizes current ideas about, and uses of, disability and queerness” (McRuer 80) see “As Good As It Gets: Queer Theory and Critical Disability” in GLQ 9:1-2 (2003).
with a pretty blue-collar waitress who has a heart of gold? McRuer notes: “the queer/disabled figure . . . facilitates the heterosexual romance” (95). After Simon gets beaten up badly enough to have to use a wheelchair – and later a cane – he becomes a site of sympathetic motivation for Melvin and Carol’s closeness. In turn, Melvin’s new sexual potential with Carol apparently gives him enough confidence to overcome his disability and allows him to step wherever he pleases. As a result of Melvin’s transformation, McRuer observes, “Simon, disability, and queerness are all hustled offstage together [as] the film concludes with a fairly traditional romantic reunion between the (able-bodied) male and female leads” (95). The queer/disabled character, then, is dismissed rather quickly in order to fulfill the normalcy he makes possible.

Mitchell and Snyder’s text *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* helps establish the presence of disability as a complicating feature of a writer’s “representational univers[e]” (2). If “disability serves as a master trope that challenges pervasive social fictions about the experiences of embodiment” (Brueggemann et al. 4), it also reinforces such fictions – as one might “pass” as normal with the use of a prosthetic limb – as enabling prosthetics for more able, desirable, and as I discuss in chapter four, sensational, embodiments and outcomes in a text. For example, Clifford, the grumpy, sexless, war-injured wheelchair-user in D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* perpetuates the novel’s message of sexual virility as ability. Shortly after his marriage to Constance he goes to fight in Flanders, gets injured, and after a lengthy convalescence in the hospital, returns “with the lower half of his body, from the hips down, paralysed for ever” (88). While Clifford’s story is not unique, Lawrence’s narrator contrasts his new physicality to ideas of a ‘more able’ self. Lawrence writes:

> Big and strong as he was, he was helpless. He could wheel himself about in a wheeled chair, and he had a sort of bath-chair with a motor attachment, in which he could puff slowly round the park. But alone he was like a lost thing. He needed Connie to be there, to assure him he existed at all. (17)

In addition to a meek framing of physical self-determination via prosthetic device, this passage – overwrought with pity as Clifford’s disability erases his sense of self – exposes a well-worn normative concept that ability (Connie) needs to accompany disability (Clifford) for legitimacy of its experience. As the novel progresses, Clifford’s

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34 Her job, in part, allows her to make ends meet and care for her young son’s respiratory ailment – a disability embodiment also erased by her eventual relationship with Nicholson’s wealthy writer character.
physical and sexual ‘dysfunction’ act – to return to Mitchell and Snyder’s multivalent concept – as prostheses in the narrative to ensure Lady Chatterley and her lover, Mellors, fulfill the requisites of able-bodied heteronormativity.

In contrast, disability’s complexities and motivations need not confirm either able-bodied stability or sexual ‘results’ for others. Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” presents a disabled female character who, under the premise of attaining intimacy with a young savvy thief posing as a Bible salesman, ends up having her wooden leg stolen, and in the novella, *Wise Blood*, O’Connor presents an initially able-bodied character who deliberately blinds himself to be a more compelling preacher. Each of these metaphorical conscriptions of disability in modernist texts reveals sociotextual inequities and suggests ways disability theory, experience and histories can reclaim these works for social/cultural analysis and critique. As chapter three illustrates, through a close reading of John Belluso’s play, *Voice Properties*, and discussions of disability and desire, representations like Lawrence’s Clifford promote false notions of the cripple as sexless and miserable.

**Am I a Special Effect?**

**35 Visuality, Performance and Aesthetics**

Before providing a brief overview of each chapter, I want to share some disability art/performance art that encourages different and more inclusive ways of being and thinking through embodiment-as-discourse, a strategy I will return to throughout my dissertation. Moving away from modernist narratives that seek disability’s erasure – or, rereading them as narratives of disability, as I do with Beckett’s *Murphy* in chapter one – welcomes questions and tensions between postmodern ambivalence and ideas of dismodern mutability. Unbridled expressions of embodiment in the work of Mary Duffy, Kevin Connolly and Gretchen Anne Schaper, for example, make the case for (and the pages of) disability theory’s more recent foray into aesthetics, visual art, and performance both concrete and necessary. These artists’ practices and the inclusion of their embodiment as part of those practices help redefine bodies and their experiences over time. I think our techno-screen-centered, highly visible (for many)—or, as Garland-

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35 On the possibility of a film’s ‘special effects’ subsuming embodiment Snyder and Mitchell suggest “Special effects threaten to overwhelm the more tried-and-true filmic spectacle of a disabled body navigating an environment in its own unique manner” (*Cultural Locations* 157). For a recent example visit the trailer for *Soul Surfer*. 

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Thomson terms it, “ocularcentric” (*Staring* 25) – culture offers different experiences of
disability to suggest that the thread of Aristotelian ethos mapping the 'animal' of disability
is wearing pretty thin. Such foregrounding works against the dominant historical
treatment and perception of disability as something to be at worst overcome and at best
erased.

If we consider the colonization of disability an ablenational eugenic imperative to
correct, cure, and/or kill “this new Other” (Kudlick), then, as Michael Davidson offers,
performance is a “key venue” of post-colonialization (81). In the same regard, images
and histories of what was exclusive to the medical domain and subject to the gaze of
doctors and what was caged or prodded as spectacle for five cents a peep in the now
extinct freak show lose their mystery. Making disability a historical present allows
unique experiences and expressions of embodiment to generate agency for those who
occupy them. Davidson describes the estrangement disability poses as a “corporal and
sensory version of modernist *ostrerenie*,” or a formalist idea that art makes strange in
order to “re recuperat[re] a world too familiar to notice” (5). Does the “strangeness” disability
arguably embodies in various (re)presentations depend on how long we linger upon the
image or the performance? Garland-Thomson sets out a similar process by suggesting
‘the stare’ seeks assurance much more so than the knowledge-assuming gaze. Counter
to the gaze, however, staring creates a shift in normative power relations in favour of the
staree, not the starer—much like Peter Dinklage’s climactic reframing of himself in a bar
full of patrons in *The Station Agent*.

Photographer and world traveller Kevin Connolly, born with no legs, uses his
unique, unexpected vantage point to photograph starers as they reconcile with his non-
typical form. His image, “Woman and Children; Sarajevo, Bosnia,” (see below) registers
its subjects’ surprise and interest – certainly greater than the interest in their popsicles –
in Connelly’s physique and actions. By sharing people’s reactions within a moment of
everyday life, Connolly’s image inverts dominant structures of power to ask for similar
social “everyday” acceptance of his embodiment as “livable and fully human” (Garland-
Thomson, *Staring* 92). Part of the process the starer goes through to make sense of
what he or she does not understand, Garland-Thomson explains, involves “urgent efforts
to make the unknown known [and] to render legible something that at first glance seems
incomprehensible” (15), ultimately and most productively as a gesture of “mutual
recognition across difference” (72).
Siebers challenges the artistic role of embodiment as normative, suggesting: “Disability does not express defect, degeneration, or deviancy in modern art. Rather, disability enlarges our vision of human variation and difference, and puts forward perspectives that test presuppositions dear to the history of aesthetics” (3). If so, to encompass the physical/sculptural breach between often-startled responses to the work of performance artist Mary Duffy (see below) posing for audiences and heckling them at times and the line-ups and flash bulbs for the statue of the Venus de Milo seems to disqualify the desire for actual disability experience, but affirm the desire for its representation, which is a more familiar experience for many of us. Similarities between Duffy’s body and Alexandros of Antioch’s ancient sculpture generate a spatial irony, where a statue “called beautiful by the tradition of modern aesthetic response . . . eschews the uniformity of perfect bodies to embrace the variety of disability” (Siebers 5). The iconic significance of disability’s representation exposes real inequities in comparison to lived experiences of disability and problems of the “it’s just a representation” argument – something that Duffy’s image and presence engages on her own terms to reveals the beauty of imperfection.

Images left to right: Mary Duffy – from Disability Aesthetics (86), Kevin Connolly “Woman and Children; Sarajevo, Bosnia” from Staring (92), and Gretchen Anne Schaper, Crawling Performance Piece (2000), photo Kate Drendel, from Disability Theory (191).

Mary Duffy’s statuesque performances, Kevin Connolly’s unexpected point-of-view photos and paraplegic Gretchen Anne Schaper’s literal hands-on-engagement with her campus as an experiment about “disability, endurance, strangers, pain and the human condition” (Corbet, qtd. in Siebers 190-91) bring a living, breathing dimension to disability’s representation and/as experience. The power of disability’s mutability
demands our attention and a coming to terms with what might be visually and spatially “incomprehensible” in real ways. Schaper going to classes for a day without her wheelchair demands reconsideration of an agreeable social environment for all. As the image from her performance above shows, not everyone engages with physical space in the same ways. As Davidson confirms, such acts envision “disability becom[ing] the ethos of the social insofar as it exposes cultural [normative] assumptions about the social body” (5). So, the hard-to-define postmodern body becomes “dismodern” (Davis), and in the process challenges postmodern notions of ambivalence by advocating dependence upon one another – although no one assisted Schaper that day. She was, however, addressed “by four people” (Siebers 192). Schaper’s experience, similar to Duffy, exposes rifts between representation and embodiment, experience and equity, that my concept of sociotextual inequity seeks to tie together. If disability is indeed everywhere, its people are not treated equitably – socially or spatially. Even as disability art redefines ideas of public space, the shift requires public engagement, support, attention and accessible design. Similarly, representations and performances of disability in literature, while, again, everywhere, require equitable treatment within dominant critical spaces of literary and cultural theory.

In beautifully uneasy moves and frames, and in needed protest, the immediacy of these artists’ embodiment in their art – as their art – reaffirms the importance of theorizing the body in all its forms and privileges – not just those shaped as normal by those who are not. Disability theory and its people must continue to find unique, collaborative means with established and yet-to-be discovered discourses to challenge and seek alternatives to normalcy in terms of disability.

I believe disabled embodiment and its productive disruptions in visual and sociocultural fields will help make disability as approachable as its theories. Working with other identities, Sandahl reiterates, can reveal relationships between queerness, disability, stage and society, for example, not immediately available in a disabled-only context:

For queer performers, visibility often means proclaiming an otherwise invisible sexuality onstage; the task is different for disabled performers, whose visible impairments often lead to social invisibility. Here I mean social invisibility both metaphorically (as in nondisabled people’s lack of regard for disabled people) and literally (as in disabled people’s lack of access to public spaces). (30)

36 See Jack Layton’s cane.
With cliché representations\textsuperscript{37} in full view, Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotič’s suggest in their recent text \textit{The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film} that “One of the quickest paths to critical acclaim for an able-bodied actor is to play a physically disabled character in a manner that a largely uninformed audience finds convincing” (1); this foregrounds the tension between various bodies, performances of disability, assumptions of knowledge, and authenticity of experience – especially when disabled characters play themselves and especially when we know the significance of the act. If Sandahl can be “fooled” into thinking that an actual disabled actor had found work and had performed stunningly” (27), then is it so surprising that disability transforms our tired ways of thinking, our tired metaphors, and can be a desirable position for (a) change?

**Chapter Overview**

\textit{Not Until I Stand Up: Framing a Disability Theory of Value for Contemporary Narrative} investigates how representations of disability in fiction, film, performance and visual art/media resist and reflect oppressive histories of “ability.” I also consider how disability appears (and disappears) in current neoliberal narratives that define what kinds of bodies and behaviours we privilege in our social spaces and artistic mediums. Each of my four chapters begins with a brief analysis of a contemporary narrative of disability that features in the media in some way: the closure of a corrective institution in New Hampshire; the physical assault of British actor, Martin Henderson, who is also a dwarf; the framing of Bell Media’s mental health campaign, “Let’s Talk”; and the story of Chinese farmer Sun Ji fa, a double amputee who crafts and sells homemade prosthetic arms. Each story, then, works as an exegesis to explore a range of inequities that affect disabled people historically and presently that are often reaffirmed in literature, plays and films in figuratively excessive, immaterial ways. This process helps me establish my contribution to literary disability studies in the form of sociotextual inequity, or moments where representations of disability in texts are disproportionate to its histories, experiences and exclusions in material ways.

\textsuperscript{37} In “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People,” Paul Longmore cites three well-worn tropes of disability in film (and narrative). He writes, “disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their ‘fate’ [and] disabled people resent the non-disabled and would, if they could, destroy them” (4). Garland-Thomson’s “The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography” establishes the stare as a normative means to maintain a safe distance from disability.
I believe reading disability’s employment in material ways in texts can reveal moments of agency (and other allegiances) and provide means to read disability more equitably and dimensionally. A range of socio-theoretical, critical and contemporary cultural sources helps establish shifts of embodiment and empowerment over time. For example, as I have mentioned (and will discuss in chapter two), I read Tod Browning’s employment and normative portrayal of circus and sideshow actors in *Freaks* (1932) as part of a representational and socio-historical continuum that includes the normal-as-freak-like framing of Peter Dinklage’s character, Fin, in *Station Agent* (2004), demonstrating how the term “freak” now occupies multivalent spaces of magnetism and repulsion. Each chapter also unifies around a loosely defined genre – fiction, film and performance – from (roughly) 1930 to the present. The first two chapters feature late-modern texts (Beckett’s *Murphy* and Browning’s *Freaks*) and move towards the present, while the later chapters investigate more contemporary texts (Handke’s *Kaspar*, Belluso’s *Voice Properties*, and the films *Planet Terror* and *Machine Girl*) – all in order to situate a range of representations in contemporary contexts relative to the oppression and emancipation of disability and other (marginalized) populations that shape our present understandings of disability in/as text and culture.

My first chapter, “How I Can Go On: The Displeasure of Modernity’s ‘Murphy’ and his Textual Biopower,” considers Irish writer Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy* (1938) and its characters as shaped by disabled experience rather than as emblematic of his authorial genius. I read the disabled body in *Murphy* in material rather than metaphorical terms. Doing so offers a paradigm shift by materializing the metaphorical disabled body in modernist literature and in the process valuing disability experience. Along with foregrounding a critique of institutionalization and eugenics, I examine how representations of disability and institutionalization challenge compulsory ableism and labour emerging out of modernism. Much Beckett discourse romanticizes his author function while maintaining his employment of disability as choice or metaphor. *Murphy’s* characters, however, support an inclusive disability studies’ critique that shifts modernist literary studies of the Other. Counter to neoliberal implications that Beckett belongs to all fields, Ato Quayson notes “it is very rare that his impaired characters are read as disabled, even though their disabilities are blatant and should be impossible to ignore” (Quayson, 2007: 28). Borrowing from Lennard Davis, Michael Davidson suggests Beckett’s characters offer a ‘dismodern’ challenge to independent agency. Like *Murphy*, several Beckett texts feature disabilities and advocate social bonding. Here, I argue that
the avoidance of disability’s materiality within dominant Beckett criticism reveals a key sociotextual inequity that reflects the larger concerns around saleable narratives and an emphasis on individualism that precludes inclusivity. Countering such impulses, Murphy treats patients with dignity (akin to his progeny McMurphy, from One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest), reveals myths of aesthetic purity, and exposes very real dangers of ‘correcting’ intellectual disability. Beckett’s own experiences with disability contribute to an imperfect tradition of expressing mental and physical difference as valuable, equitable discourse and practice within our institutions.

My second chapter, “You Can’t Show That: Freaking Priceless Babies, False Equalities and What Disability Buys on Film,” and its discussion of The Station Agent and Freaks, explores the possibilities and problems around filmic representations of disability amidst a range of economic tensions concerning disability in/as cultural industry. I also advocate for disabled actors an end to inequitable treatment within an industry-policed normalcy that shapes mediums for a dominant cultural imaginary and uptake with real repercussions. Martin Henderson’s limited employment because of someone treating him as an embodiment of clichéd representations and the success of Peter Dinklage because he refuses to play stereotypical roles of a dwarf reveal sociotextual inequity and reasons to lessen it – something, arguably, the producers of The Wolf of Wall Street ignore. Dinklage’s successes, however, including his starring role as Tyrion Lannister in the HBO hit series Game of Thrones also reinforce a problematic model of heteronormative success in the film/television industry. Dinklage’s role as “Fin” in The Station Agent, read alongside some of the performers in Tod Browning’s Freaks, reveal tensions of ability-as-disability or of normal as freak/freak as normal while featuring actors making careers in spite of, and because of, their disabilities. Both films’ history of making and marketing a romance between a male character of diminutive stature and a typically-sized female also contribute to a history of films that normalize disability through heteronormative sexuality. At times, each film’s narrative, use of perspective and other technologies normalize disability (or disable ability) in ways that reflect a sense of false, equality limiting roles for disabled people as working actors – especially in terms of heteronormative, saleable dictates of available role choices that reinforce normative expectations on film.

My third chapter, “Giving Notice or Being Noticed? Embodiment, Performance and Other Stages of Disability,” investigates how performance and language combine to reveal significant sociotextual inequities that maintain the use of disability as metaphor to
synthesize non-disabled experiences. I consider the myth of language’s control over disorder within a long history of exploiting disabled subjects. Peter Handke’s play *Kaspar* (1968) and its historical model of fascination, Kaspar Hauser, invites a reading of the cultural significance of Kaspar as enigmatic autistic figure and “wild boy” that troubles the relationship between linguistic imperative and normalizing embodiment in Handke’s language play. As a counter to such normative impulses, for the first time in the context of larger, more familiarized cultural appropriations and stereotypes of disability, I theorize disabled playwright John Belluso’s short work, *Voice Properties (On A First Date After A Full Year Of Februarys)* (2006). His play features Barney – a character with cerebral palsy who uses a powerchair and vocalizing device – on a blind date. People in the audience wear headphones, and hear what Barney says when he presses enter on the device. Conversely, audiences can hear what his date, Yolinda, says via headphones while on stage she gesticulates without moving her lips. In less aggressive and symbolic ways than Handke’s “magic eye” (59) above the stage that coerces Kaspar to brief “normative” behaviour, Belluso reveals dominant stereotypes of disabled experience to reflect alternate ways of communicating embodiment while still playing with slippage of language during communication. As important, *Voice Properties* presents disabled experience as one of romantic possibility, humour, tension, and desire.

My final chapter, “What’s Your Sign? Powering the Prosthesis and Disabling Lines of Contemporary Constraint,” investigates a range of prosthetics theory alongside materialities of experience. From excessive, visceral and sexualized employment of weaponized prosthetics in contemporary pop-culture films *The Machine Girl* (2008) and *Planet Terror* (2007) to the religious and moral determinism of Joy/Hulga’s wooden leg in Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” (1955), I foreground a breadth of prosthetic possibilities, problems and how its theories – including those of Vivian Sobchack, Sara S. Jain, David Wills – read narrative and experience. The often-excessive meaning making of prosthesis and/as identity, I believe, calls for an examination of sociotextual inequities around ontology and, more specifically, a shift in terms of what it means to be whole, both physically and in terms of narrative constructions. Building upon the work of Mitchell and Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis*, I argue that the prosthetic acts as a literal narrative enabler that works to achieve normative closure. My multivalent critical and cultural discussion of prosthetics from etymology to economics, from an often-sensational means of “overcoming” disability in narrative to being a crucial component
and extension of people’s lives, will focus on prostheses in media, film and literature to
demonstrate moments of sociotextual inequity that call for inclusive materiality of
disability and its possibilities. Overall, I believe that more equitable representations and
employments of disability and prosthetics in cultural production will balance the cachet of
their exploitation with considerations of those who use them and other assistive
technologies as part of their lived experience and themselves.

Together, I hope my discussion brings accessible moments of how literary and
cultural disability studies engage with the material of disability and its experiences in
constructive, empowering ways. I also hope my theorization of sociotextual inequity
(among other discursive threads) provides productive models and moments of analysis
that change dominant understandings and sociocultural appropriations and oppressions
of disability – especially as a means to celebrate disability on its own terms.
Chapter One:  
How I Can Go On: The Displeasure of Modernity’s “Murphy” and his Textual Biopower

“There’s only alternative currency we have is our bodies.” (Bill McKibben)

“You were always in dire need of a hand, Willie.” (Winnie from Samuel Beckett’s Happy Days)

On January 18, 2012 I received a link to a short documentary via Beth Haller and the Society for Disability Studies’ listserv. Created by the disability/community rights’ organization People First of New Hampshire, the film, entitled Institutions: Close Them, visits five former “residents” of New Hampshire’s infamous Laconia State School and Training Center. The narrative shares residents’ recollections of systematic abuse by the school’s employees. Each participant in the film expresses an obvious desire, capacity and sense of relief in leaving the institution’s inhumane confines and practices – including forced consumption of medication, a perpetual lack of private, dignified space in which to wash, rest and communicate – for greater self-determination and present-day interdependence.

Roberta, a long-time Laconia resident, who, in addition to enduring continual verbal, physical and sexual abuse by “many of the residents . . . employees and the employers,” recalls her parents placing her in the “school” at age five because of a learning disability. A montage of scenes documents her admission and release documents (nearly forty years apart); coupled with present scenes of her walking happily down the steps of her state’s legislative building and amidst her community, they certainly make a compelling, necessary argument for closing similar institutions. The practice of corralling and “correcting” intellectual disability through violence, social negation and historical erasure via a school “founded on the principle that ‘feeblemindedness’ represented not only a cognitive shortcoming but also a moral flaw” (Dubois, qtd in Kitch 2) reveals how eugenics has historically been framed as playing a benevolent role for a “greater good” on sociocultural, moral and economic grounds.

Although brief, the film brings names, faces and voices to the too-silent histories and spaces of institutional victimization. The film also undoes some of its good work,

38 According to the film, as of 1991 Laconia was the first such state institution in the United States to close its doors.
however, by aligning its subjects under a saccharine spiritual soundtrack that repeats the word “freedom” – as do several interviewees – numerous times. While compelling for audiences and important as a means of allowing the subjects of the film to articulate their goals, the film also frames the concept of freedom through assertions of nationalistic, economic and heteronormative ability. Frank is keen to “go to the mall and shop at Wal-Mart,” Linda is now happily married – something her keepers said she could never be – and Joanne is just glad to live in America, a place where “you have your freedom and don’t have to look over your shoulder.” Ironically, the apparent normalcy the film’s subjects attain in their later years echoes similar tensions between ablenational, biopolitical ideologies that have institutionalized disabled peoples – along with other undesirables – prior to and throughout most of the twentieth century, ideologies that are still at work on the ground, in our narratives, and valued in our cultural imaginary in various ways.

The local newspaper published “A Cautionary Tale: The Story of Laconia State School” six years after the institution’s closure. While not quite the same story provided by its residents, the article discusses the institution’s eighty-eight-year role in the community and suggests its closure was due to being “no longer economic to operate” (Kitch 4) rather than due exclusively to its decades of human rights violations. Such institutional devolution is perhaps inevitable given the contradictory impulses governing the Laconia School’s creation. In 1901, the New Hampshire Federation of Women’s Clubs argued:

As a simple act of justice, is it right for the State, the guardian and protector of all its citizens – its children – to discriminate wholly in favor of those who are well endowed, and cast off those, who through no fault of theirs, are lacking in mental equipment? Furthermore, as an act of self-protection, is it not the part of wisdom to guard society from the crimes, the vice, and the immorality of this degenerate class, who with their weak willpower and deficient judgment are easily influenced by evil? (2)

Histories of violent, spatial exclusion masked as state-sponsored social benevolence expose how biopolitical economics and morality become explicitly tied up with the sensationalism of institutions and their disabled inhabitants, then and now. While a lack of economic viability linked to decreased government funding or level of client care might provide public rationale for the school’s closure, giving names, faces and histories to the once “degenerate class” certainly influences the state’s desire to avoid legal bills and mirrors the school’s lack of responsibility of care as another “act of self-protection.” The local newspaper’s unwitting presentation of Laconia’s oppressive history as a
“cautionary tale,” while cautioning against its repetition, also manages to situate its violations as distant mistakes, as if to say “it’s all better now, and that sort of thing doesn’t happen to disabled people anymore.” Unlike a fictional anecdote, however, the people in the schoolhouse are real.

If safer, society-and-shopper-friendly disabled neoliberal subjects like Frank and others replace dominant, modernist, often-fearful understandings, or absent readings of disability, the desire to shop at Wal-Mart marks a new phase in a continuing eugenicist history – one that now makes accessibility synonymous with consumption while masking other gross inequities and human rights violations in hiring and labour practices. Is Frank ever “free enough” to get a job there?39 Does he need one? Or, does his non-productive labour power,40 or capital through consumption, ensure a different space, without the cold showers, monitoring, abuse and medication that perpetuates inaccessibility for many who identify (or are identified as) disabled?

Institutional and individual liberation, then, depend upon one’s ability to produce and consume, or not. Frank’s incarceration for feeblemindedness and his release in light of his economic activity provides an example of how eugenic, biopolitical and economic motivations work together to privilege and romanticize individual “achievement” while dismissing many real inequities. I believe that similar motivations and dismissals are at work in discourses around the materiality of disability in narrative, creating what I call “sociotextual inequities,” or moments where disability’s employment and narrative representation are disproportionate to histories, contemporary experiences, and exclusions of disability. My first chapter explores how representations and textual embodiments of economy, disability and institutionalization in Samuel Beckett’s Murphy (1938) challenge the privilege and maintenance of compulsory ableism and biopolitics emerging out of modernism. The bodies and behaviours that populate Murphy’s pages help support a disability studies’ critique of the dominant apolitical discourse surrounding the text and Beckett’s writing more generally. Although some recent discussions of his work feature the body, they, along with previous “modern” readings I visit apply a critical

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39 In Crip Theory, Robert McRuer discusses Wal-Mart’s ableist hiring practices in spite of their seemingly inclusive advertisements.

40 Snyder and Mitchell discuss the disability professions’ intervention or “rescue” of disabled populations from “labor force exclusions” through often ineffective anti-discrimination policies and “near-subsistence level medical and social services” and suggest “the entry of disabled ‘consumers’ into market systems becomes an odd and nuanced affair in that the basis of those classified as consumers usually requires ‘purchasing power,’ the one thing that the majority of disabled people do not possess” (“Introduction” 114-15).
“straightjacket,” or corrective, to Beckett in terms of romanticizing his author function while directing his employment of disability either as “a choice” or kept at a distance – where the material disability fuels his genius. Given an antiquated but still operative institutional imperative of “caring for those branded ‘feebleminded’ while protecting society from them” (Kitch 1), I also suggest the critique of medical, corrective models of intellectual disability in *Murphy* can help expose readers to the problems of maintaining disability as a choice or as a metaphor. Reading the disabled/non-productive body in *Murphy* along with the general failure to attend to disability in Beckett criticism will, I hope, help stop the shaping of disability into agreement with ableism and allow his characters’ equitable, inclusive spaces to realign the cultural value of his work in terms of its remarkability and its taking pleasure in difference.

**Beckett’s “Murphy”: A Real Twentieth-Century Schizoid Man?**

“The economy of care was better served, in the experience of the resistive, when they knit up the sleave by day.” (*Murphy* 239)

An appetite for idealizing the medical/institutional model of disability and its characters in narrative in ableist terms persists from the romantic era to the present. How narratives of disability and institutionalization take on different roles or values in our cultural (and economic) imaginary depends largely upon who is telling the story (and for whom), as well as its perspectives and material influences upon their audiences. Why might reading a “cautionary tale” about the biopolitical perils of an institution and its inhabitants who were buried in “unmarked graves in random locations” (Kitsch 4) be more available and, arguably, saleable than the five former residents of Laconia School given face-time to voice its oppression? Does narrative distance imply social distance? Does fictionalizing such narratives for larger audiences make them more palatable, or somehow safer for wider cultural consumption?

Beckett’s *Murphy* features several days in the life of its eponymous character, including his begrudging, often humorous search for employment; this search is motivated by his partner, Celia, in the hopes of diminishing her reliance upon prostitution as a means of their economic support. His eventual job as a caregiver in a psychiatric

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41 As of 23 Feb. 2012, You Tube reveals 1017 views of the film. The circulation of the *Laconia Daily Sun* is approximately 17,000 (nenpa.com).
institution appears to bring him comfort. The novel privileges a range of embodiments and perceptions that do not confer (and thereby critique) normative outcomes or dominant theoretical, cultural/narrative expectations. My concern, and interest, resides in the irony – and success in the cultural imaginary – of the institution as a desirable place to be in spite of its often-perilous outcomes within fiction and without. In this case, “Murphy,” according to his third-person interlocutor “was only too anxious to test his striking impression that here was the race of people he had long since despaired of finding” (169). Hints of biopolitical anthropology aside, his short-lived employment at the “Magdalen Mental Mercyseat”\textsuperscript{42} (88) ends, suspiciously, in a gas explosion. Post-demise, his creative influence finds more recent progeny as the compelling anti-hero “McMurphy” (or, “son of” Murphy) in Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1962) and its subsequent film adaptation.\textsuperscript{43} Beckett’s character provides a kinder model for other institutionalized characters to follow. Gary Winship notes, “Beckett’s Murphy tells us of a different era from Cuckoo’s Nest, and set in the UK, a different cultural disposition to Kesey’s novel. Beckett’s account of the asylum and its staff is more sympathetic and perhaps remedies some of the negative perceptions of psychiatry in the twentieth century” (339). Why then do most Beckett scholars ignore the historical and cultural value of these (and other) at-times sensational and problematic narratives of mental-patient advocacy?

At a slight remove from those texts, other factors and practices contribute to someone who wants “in” to an institution garnering more cultural attention and value than someone who wants “out” of one. For example, in what seems a logical fallacy, both Murphy and his intertextual/filmic echo McMurphy, seek immersion (as a caregiver and patient, respectively) in asylums as a means of relief from their possible lives outside of the institution. For Murphy, evading the prospect of marriage and a steady job, and for McMurphy, serving an easier form of jail time for rape, offer variants of corrective, ableist “success” which result in the death/murder of both “flawed” characters. While larger social commentaries in these texts ask readers or viewers to be wary of inhumane institutions and their protocols, in part by dimensionalizing disabled characters in sympathetic ways, each character’s perilous outcome\textsuperscript{44} suggests no possibility of life beyond institutional walls, regardless of why someone arrives there in the first place.

\textsuperscript{42} I will hereafter refer to it as the MMM.
\textsuperscript{43} Directed by Miloš Forman, the film garnered five Oscars in 1976.
\textsuperscript{44} Murphy dies in a gas explosion and McMurphy is suffocated post-lobotomy.
Though uneasy, each story resolves in the success of such systems. I believe this irony marks a productive and largely untried space for disability studies. More broadly speaking, this unease speaks to the significant lack of meaningful discussion of disability and the disabled body in Beckett. As I mention throughout this chapter, the work of various ideologies, including dominant narratives of eugenic “improvement” and the tiresome Cartesian roots of the Beckettian cultural field/industry, frames disabled characters in ableist terms, romanticizes Beckett’s author function and limits disability studies perspectives of his work. Counter to neoliberal economic impulses that might insist Beckett belongs to all fields, Ato Quayson points out “it is very rare that his impaired characters are read as disabled, even though their disabilities are blatant and should be impossible to ignore” (28). Is there some hesitancy around what initially seems a socially useful theoretical, representational and experiential fit? Conversely, why do so few really want “in” on the discussion? Borrowing from British disability scholar Len Barton’s concerns that disability studies still requires justification in the literary domain, Tom Coogan notes that the “remaking of universities in the image of business (i.e., taking business criteria as the sole markers of quality) [contributes] to an emphasis on individualism that precludes inclusive thinking” (“Comment from the Field” 104). Successful academic “business” effaces inclusive discussions of disability in Beckett with individual achievement.

I suggest the largely untried disability studies approach towards his work can “sell” within the business of Beckett criticism and its individualist tendencies. Several of his texts, including Murphy, not only feature disabilities but also advocate the assistance and (at times, suspect) comfort of social bonding. I believe the text shares an ethos and ethics akin to Lennard Davis’s ideas of dismodernism, which argue for “a commonality of bodies within the notion of difference” (31), founded upon the idea that “we are all nonstandard” and in effect disabled by “shared injustice and oppression of various kinds” (32). Michael Davidson suggests: “Beckett . . . dismodernizes liberal theories of autonomy and independent agency by creating scenes of what we might call ‘abject dependency’” (56). Davidson’s notion of a post-ableist era (mentioned in my introduction) stems from his observations of the many co-dependant relationships of the

45 In addition to refusing to appear for his 1969 Nobel Prize for literature, Beckett also rejects associations with the Absurdist movement, in part because of its necessity to make “value judgement[s]” (qtd. in Juliet).
46 In addition to Murphy, Happy Days, Mercier and Camier and Waiting for Godot all provide examples of interdependent characters.
disabled and the often physically unproductive characters in Beckett’s work acting as a “parable of the limits of agency” (57). Dominant socioeconomic and cultural narratives find ideas of dependence repellent, and in the case of *Endgame*, for example, when Hamm (who is blind and uses a wheelchair) and Clov (his caregiver) are “read through a disability optic,” Davidson writes, “[they] function within an ableist ideology that views dependant relations as weakness” (63). As Hamm mentions to Clov near the close of the play, “It’s we are obliged to each other,” which, from a disability theory position of interdependence47 bridges dominant textual readings that play out socially and culturally as inequitable. Rectifying sociotextual inequity here proves both necessary and empowering even if thought of in the normative cultural imaginary as weak.

Although not always successful, interdependency is often present in spite of characters’ limitations. In contrast, Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee’s address to a 2006 “Borderless Beckett” conference in Tokyo sets out numerous approaches for reading a globalized Beckett. Beginning with a Cartesian, individualist privileging of mind-as-confirmation-of-bodily-existence, Coetzee eventually likens – via a very awkward analogy – the drive and subsequent peril of Herman Melville’s amputee-protagonist Captain Ahab (and his harpooning of the whale) to what several of Beckett’s characters experience, presumably, with a “white wall” blocking their view – and, for some in *Murphy* that wall is an “oyster-grey” padded cell (181). He writes,

> Why do these creatures not grasp their harpoon and hurl it through the white wall? Answer: Because they are impotent, invalid, crippled, bedridden. Because they are brains imprisoned in pots without arms or legs. Because they are worms. Because they do not have harpoons, only pencils at most. Why are they cripples or invalids or worms or disembodied brains armed at most with pencils? Because they and the intelligence behind them believe that the only tool that can pierce the white wall is the tool of pure thought. Despite the evidence of their eyes that the tool of pure thought fails again and again and again. You must go on. I can’t go on. Go on. Try again. Fail again. (31)

Replete with sentence fragments and familiar pejorative lines, Coetzee’s assessment of Beckett’s “crippled” characters not only attempts to mimic Beckett’s writing style, but also resolves itself in the ableist idealization of overcoming “invalid” bodies through the power

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47 As a disability experience analogue (which also creates important discussions of human and animal relationships and their associative values that I have mentioned briefly in my thesis and are also garnering more attention as a newer locus of disability theory) Rod Michalko describes his duality with his guide dog, Smokie, as a uniquely singular experience for a uniquely disabled experience beyond the confines of ableism – a relationship he describes as being “alone together in our identities and this togetherness binds them into our identity. Together and separate we are alone and alone we are one” (qtd. in Kumari-Campbell 55).
of thought, however futile. Imparting a romantic perspective that Beckett and his mentor Joyce would undoubtedly bristle at, Coetzee presents Beckett’s author function as perpetually hungry and able,\(^{48}\) while also placing an earlier modern anti-hero icon under the same persuasive lens. He continues:

> It helps to be lean, and Beckett was as lean as Kafka. It helps to have a piercing gaze, and Beckett had his own variety of piercing gaze. Like photographs of Kafka, photographs of Beckett show a man whose inner being shines like a cold star through the fleshly envelope. But soul can shine through flesh only if soul and flesh are one. If soul and flesh belong to distinct realms, and their conjunction is an everlasting mystery, then no photograph will ever tell the truth. (32)

In addition to being confusing, Coetzee’s praise takes individual authorial prowess and/or their idealized public(ized) images for existential, ontological insight, ironically by pairing two innovative writers who worked in obscurity and poverty for most of their careers on opposite temporal ends of modernism. Mind/body tension here packs a steely-eyed, speculative authorial enigma into a “fleshy” container that reaffirms a sort of cultural and literary sainthood for each author. Do photographs that “tell the truth” also encompass literary representations? What happens to the “crippled, bedridden [p]risone[rs] without arms or legs?” or the “creatures,” the very “worms” that contribute to the “everlasting mystery” of being? Is the work of literary studies more palatable if so many innovative, problematic and celebratory embodiments of dysfunction and disability in Beckett (and Kafka, too) materialize as fuel for the thought power of these genius authors? Textually and publically speaking, at least, narrative distance is again working to ensure a now image-friendly and “fit” icon mediates the dysfunctional characters that substantiate narrative and perspective in Beckett’s texts.

Contrary to the conference’s “borderless” claim, and as Coetzee’s address emphasizes with its favouring of the “lean” over the “invalid,” and of idealism over experience, I believe Beckett studies maintain several borders – especially in terms of a dominant critical perspective. His late-modern stylistic and representational innovations often privilege non-normative perspectives yet revert to the trappings of romanticism with the push of “established” discourse. A disability studies perspective might ask how discussions of Beckett’s various and varied characters – too often dismissed as a “mere compendium of oddities” (Fifield 241) and “a portrait gallery of cripples” (Chabert, qtd. in

\(^{48}\) So too does Michel Foucault. Early in “What is an Author?” (1970), he invokes Beckett’s cultural pull by arguing (and misquoting) *Texts for Nothing*: “What does it matter who is speaking” (281). Coetzee’s platitudes certainly maintain Beckett’s author function.
Maude 11) somehow possessing “ideal mobility” (Badiou 45) for narrative and performative delivery – might disappear so easily when embossed with an iconic Beckett photograph rather than, say, a “resistive” character “knit up the sleeve by day” (Murphy 239).

In *Illness as Metaphor* Susan Sontag notes how the “romantic view [of] illness exacerbates consciousness” (36). For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the metaphorization and cultural employment of TB\(^{49}\) occupies that role; however, she continues, “now it is insanity that is thought to bring consciousness to a state of paroxysmic enlightenment” (36). In context, her astute observation that “[a]ny disease . . . treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally contagious” (6) provides a model for how a bodily condition can shift in cultural imagination and value. Romantic “rosy cheeked” notions of passionate consumptive suffering disappear as improvements in “curing” the sick isolate patients from the greater population. Again, TB, madness and – returning to the Laconia School – developmental disabilities all share isolation in the “sanatorium.” As biopolitical,\(^{50}\) eugenic ideologies arrive with the increased authority of medicine and hospitalization, so too does societal trust in and expectations of a healthy social body to ensure national populist economic achievement.\(^{51}\) Placing Beckett in a history of modernist authors who find creative and cultural merit in the recording of, as Virginia Woolf suggests, “all this daily drama [where] there is no record [of] pain [and] illness” (“On Being Ill” 101), certainly helps dimensionalize Beckett’s characters beyond inept harpoon throwers trapped by their thoughts. If in D.H. Lawrence’s writing, as Valerie Popp suggests, “disability [is] an especially resonant motif” (41) that “informs his distinctive brand of modernism” (49-50), disability also provides a model to explore Beckett in saleable, economic terms.

\(^{49}\) As an example, consider Michael Furey’s “treatment” near the end of James Joyce’s “The Dead.”

\(^{50}\) My references to biopolitics throughout my thesis build upon Foucault’s concept of “bio-power” as “the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes [in their] many forms and modes of application” (“Right of Death and Power Over Life” 141). In the context of disability studies (and other minority discourses) I view biopower as a means to generate and sustain capital, while normalizing cultural, political, and economic modes of production based on white, male able-bodiedness first.

\(^{51}\) While he walks up steps at a construction site, Stephen Harper’s (successful) election advertisement declares in ablenationalist terms, “We still have work to do. Too many Canadians still need our help. But today our country walking taller and standing prouder and getting stronger. Our best days are yet to come. Together, as Canadians, let’s strengthen our country” (CPC commercial, 16 Mar., 2011).
Over fifty years of marketing *Murphy* around the world (from left to right – 1957 [Grove, North America]; 1971 [Éditions 10/18, France]; 1980 [Picador, New Zealand]; 1994 [Roman, Germany]; 2011 [Grove]) often involves conflations of furniture, body and mind and offers cues that that frame the novel in certain ways. In line with disability’s effacement in favour of Beckett’s visage, note how all cover images above (except the one of Beckett, of course) either omit or obscure the face of “Murphy.” The first cover symbolizes the text and its title character as an empty rocking chair to suggest an empty or absent persona awaits. An unobscured and stylish Beckett relaxing on a chair uses his contemporary iconic status as a way to sell books. The next cover offers an oppressive characterization of Murphy as a rocking chair (that also resembles a headstone) unable to speak amidst the ominous comfort of its green-grass cushion. Equally troubling, the German version presents a person hiding his identity while drawing a border around himself — dirty and alone. The most recent cover hints at Murphy’s chess playing with the schizophrenic Mr. Endon, and manages to objectify the mind as a metaphorical gaming surface/space. Other covers (for the most part) present text and/or an image of Beckett.

Although monetary constructions may help balance sociotextual inequities inherent in critical discussions of disability in Beckett, considering his characterizations beyond metaphor, as several of the *Murphy* cover images above allow, the disabled or nonstandard “dismodern” body (and means to control it) becomes a visual signifier for “shared injustice and oppression of various kinds” (Davis 32) upon the bodies in his work.

Thinking through *Murphy* and its critical discourse in terms of disabled embodiment and interdependence rather than, say, from the perspective of an iconic visage channeling a physical or mental “misfit” in order to understand metaphysical existence or better cope with the everyman’s modern-day stressors — via metaphor, or semi-romanticized madness — empowers disabled perspectives and relieves literary readings of disability from the often obligatory trappings of ableist terms. My redrawing of the critical paradigms for an assessment of Beckett’s work, when placed alongside other high modernist writers such as Woolf and Lawrence, also advocates a potential and necessary shift in modernist literary studies. Beckett’s “regula[r] encounter[s with] various disabled figures at close quarters in his lifetime” (Quayson 57), for example, merits reconsideration of his work beyond an “idealism/materialism” (Tajiri 2) binary both
in biopolitical and aesthetic terms. However, as early reviews of *Murphy* suggest (which I will visit in more depth shortly), the Beckett “brand” of disability-informed modernism is not exactly catching. In 1989, Hugh Culik submits *Murphy*’s aesthetic (and presumably critical and commercial) failure with Murphy’s (and other characters’) general unease throughout the text as “ambivalence . . . as . . . human condition[s] presented through the sources that were so disabling to the esthetic success of *Murphy* [including] images of illness” (51 “Neurological Disorder”). Clearly, disability (used as verb here) as a term in its own right, as a means to name and describe embodiment (rather than the culturally-safer and easier to metaphorize “illness”), or as a significant aesthetic of modernist art, had not arrived. In less than twenty years, however, such ill “sources” that apparently inhibit the aesthetic and initial economic achievements of the text, become, to recall Coetzee’s enigmatic praise, largely passive biomaterial fuelling the omnipotent “cold star” of Beckett’s “fleshy envelope.” More importantly, and significant to contemporary disability theories such as Tobin Siebers’ *Disability Aesthetics*, is how Culik’s intended use of “disabling” as lack in *Murphy* generates unintended creative and specific imagistic connections between textual representations of disability and the author’s experience. What is presumably a problem of perspective for Culik, Siebers (although he does not discuss Beckett specifically) views as an opportunity for an aesthetics of “tracking the emotions that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies” (1). “Making the influence of disability obvious” within a history of an aesthetic that has always included disability, he argues, allows a refusal of the healthy body as “the sole determin[er] of the aesthetic” (2). Doing so inverts the motivation of others who might place poor book sales and/or a lack of aesthetic success upon a human condition as part of a tradition of expressing illness as a valuable part of human experience.

If Beckett’s mother’s Parkinson’s disease influences the often speedy locomotion of Cooper (Culik 143) – Murphy’s pursuer throughout much of the novel – how might Beckett’s years of “suffering from anxious palpitations and many physical complaints” (Winship 340) imbue Murphy with bodily eruptions and possessing an “irrational heart that no physician [can] get to the root of . . . like Petrouchka in his box . . . ready to explode?” (*Murphy* 3). Of therapy, Beckett states, “On Monday I go for the 133rd time” (qtd. in Winship 342), which leads to his eventual interest in psychoanalysis and a month

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52 Beckett, apparently, concurs with “these contradictory notions” (qtd. in Culik 139).
of job shadowing with a friend at a “real London hospital” (Culik “Neurological” 46). Privileging disability’s material/experiential significance – so often tied to modern mythologies of wholeness or ideas of aesthetic purity – allows space to discuss how personal experiences figure into narrative and how Murphy’s bodies, as bodies that do not work in typical fashion, offer an unabashed critique of biopolitical oppression.

In articles spanning three decades, the aforementioned Culik contextualizes Murphy and its medically informed bodies, embodiment and language, and most recently, cultural anxiety and Parkinson’s. In thinking militarily through Peter Burger’s differentiation between modern and avant-garde as an “intra-literary assault” on technique versus “an assault of the social relation of art to the larger culture,” Culik suggests Beckett occupies a space stylistically within, yet ideologically outside of, modernism. He continues:

In his aesthetic agenda we see the residue of the earlier era and its reformulation that relies upon the metaphoric power of non-literary fields such as neurology, aphasiology, and mathematics to represent two related ideas: first, the descriptive (in)sufficiency of language, and second, the (in)ability of a formal system to comprehend itself. (“Mathematics” 132)

Culik’s forceful take on the subjects informing Beckett’s writing as an “agenda,” while fitting with the aggressive spatial language of the article, also aligns an aesthetics of (in)sufficiency within the body and its textual representations. Though writing in 1993, all three “non-literary fields” he mentions above are now in the purview of disability studies. Culik further distances Beckett and his work from very real oppressions of medicalization and institutionalization of the modern era, asking, “how can the totalisms of fascism and its kin persuade those who chose to inhabit the uncertainties of systematic representation?” (Culik 132). Culik’s question of Beckett’s non-fascist practice reveals similarities to the non-adherent experiences and materialities of disability that constitute his characters. Further, the systematic failure of language (especially prevalent in Watt), for example, invites discussions of those bodies such failed language represents (as I

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53 As Gary Winship clarifies (and claims), “the Bethlem Royal Hospital in Kent or ‘Magdalen Mental Mercyseat’ as it is in the novel, is the oldest (dating back to 1275) and arguably one of the most progressive large asylums in the world” (340).
54 Within (re)presentations of bodies, capital, war, work and time the “modern condition” often materializes within “problem” bodies and states of mind which do not adhere to aesthetics of purity, ability, virility and mobility.
discuss in chapter three). Questions of kinship apply also to those characters who refuse to fit into narratives of ability and, beyond being romanticized as rosy-cheeked emblems of suffering as/or idealized state of body or mind “recuperating” in a padded room somewhere, examining their functions and fictions in the sociocultural imaginary invites discussions of disability’s narratives and its people during an era of their often violent exclusion, correction and erasure.

A “return to experience” (Sheehan 140) gets closer to what I advocate as a more hopeful “embodied” reading of “Murphy” and his often-noticeable friends (who we will visit shortly) arguably helps illustrate that disability studies, like a Beckettian character, seldom leaves the body; however, recent studies of Beckett and embodiment hesitate embracing either designation. For example, Yoshiki Tajiri’s Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism (2007) and Ulrika Maude’s Beckett, Technology and the Body (2009) both do well at times to remove Beckett’s characters from purely representational spaces by sharing sensorial, phenomenological and media(ted) discussions. In a review of the latter, Peter Fifield notes “how little substance there has been to earlier critical versions of the body in Samuel Beckett’s work,” yet cautions how “recent augmentation of archival material in the field has prompted growth in genetic studies and hints at a polarization of the field” (241). Far from overstating a double meaning of genetic in biopolitical terms, the caveat Fifield skews seems a perceived imbalance towards cultural materialism that might unsettle metaphor-over-experience readings of Beckett. Ironically, the “genetic” material of Beckett’s personal experiences and associations with disability and institutionalization bring forth new discussions and “critical versions of the body.”

Given another reviewer’s able-worded suggestion that Maude’s text goes further than “claiming ‘body denial’ as a critical blind spot” (Sheehan 140, my emphasis), it is not surprising that Maude avoids explicit discussion of cognitive or physical disability in Murphy, suggesting “the mature and late works, in short, form Beckett’s most intricate and intense investigations into embodiment” (6). She does, however, confirm a critical neglect of the body’s role in his works “as a mutable basis of subjectivity” (10) and that “characters’ difficulties in moving[,] falling, rolling, limping and crawling [. . .] eating and excreting” substantiate “one of the most serious efforts in literature to bring the body to the forefront” (11). Yet, in claiming so, with Murphy at least, she maintains a distance from such bodily-foregrounding by conflating its apparently fragmentary presentation
with Beckett’s “medical imagination” and surrealism (125). In similar distancing fashion, Tajiri suggests, quite seriously, that Murphy’s rocking chair – to which he regularly and nakedly ties himself as a pleasurable means of calming his heart – serves as an anti-erotic “bachelor machine” (Tajiri 34). Such a claim asks us to accept, as Coogan might concur, a fiercely individualist perspective. This reading also asks for a perspective that relegates the significant biopolitical, supportive and emotional role of Celia (his partner who is also a prostitute) to that of a nuisance even as the text suggests otherwise. Murphy often (though begrudgingly at times) declares the “difference [her] staying with [him] makes” (30) after he lands on his face while tethered to his chair or when searching for work as he “suffer[s] her to dress him” (140). While narrative can work against its own declarations, I believe the text’s few misogynistic moments critique (rather than assert) an overtly heteronormative position. Tajiri’s contemporary theoretical reinforcement of Murphy’s often unsuccessful and injurious rocking-chair ritual as a means of escaping marriage might benefit from a disability aesthetics perspective – which, returning to Siebers, would not disavow the scene’s obvious disability influence (“surreal” though it may seem) with the stereotypical motivations of a healthy, hetero, bachelor. While Murphy’s routine lessens his very real and frequent “heart attack[s],” where “nine times out of ten his struggle to subdue [them] landed him on the floor” (30), by an ablebodied extension they also lessen his ability to “work” economically and sexually. Neither solitude nor tie downs necessitates bachelorhood here. Thinking along the lines of how narrative distance might influence perceptions of disability, I wonder if a theoretical distance from disability informs Tajiri’s ableist assertion that a prosthetic “aids the body and makes life easier” (6). The perils of Murphy in his chair suggest that is not always the case. Does necessarily embracing only certain types of bodies keep Beckett strictly representational or, as distant as a photograph?

Maude’s and Tajiri’s critical takes unfortunately avoid reading Beckett’s disabled characters as disabled. Romanticizing Beckett’s author-function as one borne out of singular authorial genius reflects an incapability (in his many of his critics’ minds) for him to write within – and critique – a universalist, ableist frame. In other words, why, within such a frame, do his non-normative bodies become the property of fabulation or surrealism? In turn, fantastical readings of madness and institutionalization in Murphy maintain sociotextual inequities that take away from the text’s critiques of a problematic

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56 The poetry of Mina Loy and Djuna Barnes’ Nightwood offer more (convincing) examples of Maude’s connection.
system. Kathryn White’s recent summary helps situate (and illustrate) this historically significant and still critically dominant line of thought. She writes:

*Murphy* [is] possibly one of the most accessible fictions that he has written. As Beckett presents an inversion of the general perception of madness, we recognize that he pushes the boundaries of the mind and forces one to confront the reality that perhaps ‘sanity’ is an inferior state of mind, where we conform to the regulations of society, dwelling primarily in our bodies and avoiding transcendence of the physical. By embracing ‘insanity’, the confines of the physical body disintegrate and we are free to wander through the landscape of our minds, where contemplation procures happiness and being oblivious to the outside world secures peace. (90)

White’s observation that Beckett inverts a “general perception of madness” with his text is not quite accurate. While Beckett’s scenes at the MMM do well to situate the charismatic Murphy as a sympathetic, efficient worker during his rounds – providing a then-seldom humanizing of “the wards” (238) during the height of the biopolitical trade in eugenics across the Atlantic – attributing the text’s accessibility to an ableism that asks readers to “embrac[e] insanity” without physical embodiment as a superior ontology is problematic. Such a claim ascribes disability as a choice, as something to overcome.

In this case, disability apparently “procures happiness” within a place where Murphy observes a “hypomanic [who] bounce[s] off the walls like a bluebottle in a jar” (Beckett 247) amongst “the familiar variety of stenches, asperities, ear-splitters and eye-closers” (246). Such a choice might invoke the question, “Why conform to normative society when I can be free to explore my mind instead?” Given this perspective, who wouldn’t want to sign up for life in an institution? Although the choice here is fictional, its repercussions romanticize perceptions of “insanity” as a viable, favourable “enlighten[ed]” (Sontag 36) ontology in comparison to regulating oneself to society while also diminishing spaces to discuss real oppressions endured by people informing Beckett’s narrative. Does the same “choice” apply to the former residents of the Laconia School?

As Walter Ong suggests, “the reader must also fictionalize the writer” (143). While I include the critic in that process, the fictions (including romantic ones) in play here have real significance outside of the text by shaping cultural understandings of disability and mental illness. In “What Have Madness and Psychiatric System Survivors Got to Do with Disability and Disability Studies?” Peter Beresford suggests there are

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57 For a humorous example of such logic applied to race, I recall Eddie Murphy’s performance as a white man from an early 1980’s episode of *Saturday Night Live*. 
“fears and anxieties on both sides of being linked with the negatives that are often associated with the other.” Although not the easiest of allies,\textsuperscript{58} he notes “disabled people and [those in] the psychiatric system . . . are both subject to discrimination and oppression” (169). How do textual representations and theoretical discourses affect cultural uptake of both ‘sides’? If physical distance might lessen social bonds, I think, as mentioned, narrative distance diminishes the importance of sociopolitical discourse in theory. Certainly White’s (and others’) appropriation of disability as a choice for the sake of idealizing Murphy’s narrative in ableist terms shifts attention from the close proximity Beckett’s work and experience provides. Their critique of the medical model of disability illuminates problems of institutionalization and rehabilitation.

Returning to the New Hampshire Federation of Women’s Clubs’ century-old desire to “protect” society from people “who with their weak willpower and deficient judgment are easily influenced by evil” (2) illustrates how arcane perceptions of disability and madness as a consequence of will or of (in ableist terms) weak character maintains a “general perception of madness” (White 90) in the cultural imaginary. White’s assertion that Beckett illustrates madness “as a supreme cultivation of mind” (92) ironically attaches a certain aesthetic and cultural value to an idealized insanity to illustrate how a story that celebrates and shares non-normative embodiments and perspectives gets dressed in vague terms (and values) of “high” cultural/theoretical discourse. Framing Beckett in this way marks territory through safe images of individualistic, choice-driven ability while backhandedly reinforcing disability as the fault and problem of the individual. If literary discourse wishes fair consideration of Murphy’s remarkable subjects and their critiques of ability then why does an individualistic ableism dominate its discourse? Such a frame for Murphy, as a character who takes to not working in game-like fashion, acts out various “able-bodied postures on the fringes of better-attended slave markets” (76), and for whom one of the day’s biggest choices involves what biscuit to eat first (although never fulfilled due to Miss Dew’s hungry dog), is both ironic and woefully inadequate.

Murphy’s early book reviews, too, help maintain an economy and cultural interest value of “madness at a distance” – a tradition traceable to Bedlam during Shakespeare’s era, where spectators paid a fee to view the hospital’s wards. A \textit{New York Times} review

\textsuperscript{58} In the same article, Beresford notes the disproportionate fear circulated by the media involving then-recent incidences of violence and suicide among people within the British mental healthcare system. He also cites Anne Plumb, a psychiatric system survivor who warns of disability studies’ “unintentional colonization of survivors” as a threat to unique identities often “defined/diagnosed” as dissenting and deviant (170). From a literary disability studies perspective, numerous disabled characters also carry similar disruptive “meanings.”
of *Murphy* from April 14, 1957 (shortly after the book’s North American re-release) defines Beckett and his work as a “‘celebrator of the schizoid’. While the review is quite favorable, it goes on to suggest Beckett makes “the schizophrenic his model and his hero” (27). The review’s scare quotes and definite articles frame “the schizoid” as both a surprising and effaceable subject to laud, and certainly one of distant, suspect fascination. Due to its limited publication and favour in Ireland and the UK, or one of its subsequent publication in French in 1947 (which, Beckett laments, sold an initial “six copies in Paris!” [Letters 76]); how might we account for the novel’s comparative lack of attention upon publication in a disability studies frame?

If the cultural wake following Beckett’s most successful work, *Waiting for Godot* – which challenges audience expectations by featuring impoverished characters with a range of ailments while maintaining seemingly perpetual dialogic, physical and spatial dependencies – arguably gives *Murphy* a saleable audience, what of Culik’s lament of similar “sources so disabling to [the text’s] esthetic success” (“Neurological” 51)? In similar fashion, reviewer of *Murphy* in 1958 seems to take much pleasure from the text yet reveals her unease by buffering the problems she has with those “others” populating its pages with divine noble savagery, suggesting, like *Godot*, the novel deals with the derelicts of society who have become for its author either symbols of uprooted twentieth-century man or simply the only saints of a civilization uncivilized, degraded, and inhuman. Here prostitutes, homosexuals, the moronic, insane, and the senile are presented unmitigatingly. They are the Beckett society. (132)

Not allowing such a deviant society too much of the literary spotlight or a favourable perspective, she identifies the perils of a modern condition in normative terms for her audience by also claiming “the author indirectly portray[s] with equal sympathy the plight of the ordinary man, who in a nightmare world must find nightmare solutions” (Zinnes 132) – even if those solutions are unordinary, comedic at times and involve, for Murphy, in addition to his disabilities, dying in a gas explosion.

Zinnes’ move to bring a probably already existent equality to the “ordinary man” (or reader/audience) in a text that does not reaffirm the ordinary as ideal also reveals a significant function of disability in narrative acting as a prosthetic (as Mitchell & Snyder

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59 According to Ackerley and Gontarski’s *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, in, “Kate O’Brien, in *The Spectator* (1938), appreciated [Murphy’s] wit: ‘a joke overloaded with the scholarship of great jokes.’ Hers was the only one [Beckett] liked” (387). *Letters* (Vol. 2), notes a sole, favourable review by Rene Dam in 1948, suggesting *Murphy* is “Un chef-d’oeuvre du genre” (qtd. 76) or, a masterpiece of its kind. By 1951, 96 copies were sold (Alvarez qtd. in I Can’t Go On xii).
might suggest) to support discourses of normalcy – rather than what Tajiri believes “makes life easier” (6). In other words, the “inhuman” becomes safe and acceptable when thought through ablebodied (and minded) terms and choices. Here, “equal sympathy” – though without equal equity – helps reveal disability studies’ critique of disabled characters “act[ing] as role models for a non-disabled audience” (Valentine 223). Murphy’s act, however, does not confirm normalcy as a desirable role.

The decades-long struggle to impose normative logic or meaning upon Murphy, I believe, finds a reprieve with disability studies – both aesthetically and (as I will show in the next section) as biopolitical critique of ableism. Far from considerations of experience or embodiment – both connecting threads in Beckett’s works – in 1970, Sighe Aileen Kennedy writes:

Is there any meaning in this chronicle of Murphy’s misfortunes? Or does it represent merely an early example of Beckett’s participation in the ‘school of the absurd’? Beckett himself has denied that his work belongs in such a category, but on any literal level of interpretation, there seems to be little alternative for such placement. (65)

Kennedy’s dismissal of the material of the body in favour of “meaning” reveals the mythology of modernist, formal unity at work and helps illustrate the importance of reading disability in Beckett. Such logic also suggests his disability-informed and experienced characters do not exist, literally, but rather – akin to White’s “fantastic” take on mental illness – as farcically. Even the then-contemporary scrutiny of the role of the author – which not surprisingly arrives out of a sociopolitical, cultural and academic shift towards discourses less white, male, hetero and ablebodied – defies Kennedy’s absurdist claim. Her assertion concerning those “grotesques who constitute the novel’s dramatis personae” (66), however, clearly objectifies Murphy’s characters and generates unease or displeasure in the novel’s critical discourse as much as it attracts interest as a unique work, despite its limited initial success.

Revisiting Siebers’ notion of disability aesthetics as what some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies in this context invites discussion of Ato Quayson’s slightly earlier text, Aesthetic Nervousness-Disability and the Crisis of Representation (2007). Quayson’s idea of aesthetic nervousness explores how disability (including in Beckett’s various characters) disrupts “dominant protocols of representation within the literary text” (15), and allows for other evaluative possibilities beyond bodily normativity. For example, the closest Kennedy comes to naming disability in Murphy appears somewhere between her use of the terms absurd and grotesque – a space where no literal (or literary
representation of) disability can occupy (to borrow her phrase) “fictional propriety” (66). Quayson suggests “images of impairment and constraint” like those found in Murphy work like an “aesthetic repetition compulsion” in his texts. Broadly speaking, Quayson’s notion of Beckett’s continual “return to the impaired human body [becoming] a means of framing a series of concerns of a creative and philosophical kind” (57) reduces various distances between disability and meaning, and most importantly – counter to the vast majority of critical approaches I have discussed – does not negate disability as meaning in its own right.

Even Quayson’s reasonably prominent role as a postcolonial studies and disability scholar does not grant him easy access to the field of established Beckett philosophy. Maude’s 2009 review of Quayson’s text in Letters in Canada brings what might seem an opportunity for agreement between Maude’s work60 on the body and Quayson’s discussions of disability in Beckett. She begins by claiming, “it is conspicuous how little critical commentary there has been on this aspect of the canon. Disability, or its representation, however, is no easy thing to pin down” (372). She then suggests Quayson’s text “suffers from a tendency towards generalization” and “suffers slightly from the attempt to be universal and overarching – which, in a paradoxical way, might be seen to go against the very notion of uniqueness and singularity evoked by the representation of disability” (373). Maude’s uneasiness around a lack of disability discourse in Beckett because of its difficulty to theorize, again within a dominant frame of individuality, does not suggest a promising union of bodily discourse and disability. She has, however, no problem in anthropomorphizing Quayson’s work as “suffering” from an attempt to unify literary disability in a range of texts. Maude’s hardly noticeable inversion of the neoliberal argument – that we all want the same things, but without real spatial, sociopolitical and economic inequities – happens when she frames disability as singular, unique and therefore truly “individual” rather than as collective, shared experience replete with the desires and successes too often ignored by those of us who are temporarily ablebodied. It is, after all, much easier to negate an individual than a community.

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60 Her critique of postmodern readings of Beckett in Technology and the Body suggests that a dysfunctional body has to be overcome. Such reading of disability is both problematic and nothing new to disability studies, yet according to Sheehan’s review it is somehow revelatory for Maude’s audience (141).
Work With Me Past the Gait

“For what was all working for a living but a procuring and a pimping for the money-bags, one’s lecherous tyrants the money-bags, so that they might breed.” (Murphy 76)

In a climate where many people live under less than equitable conditions it is important to reconsider how Quayson’s caveat that representations of disability in fiction are not synonymous “to disabled persons in reality” (30) – or, presumably with similar real-life experiences – lessens in a gesture his desire to “attend more closely to the implications of the social universe around us” (31). He also undoes some of his “non-synonymous” claim in relation to Beckett by advocating a contextualization of his “images of corporeality [as] related to their inspirations within the author’s aesthetic and philosophical concerns as well as to his life experiences” (57). Moving closer to an experiential model of disability and my aforementioned “return to the body” reveals sociotextual inequities between representations and materialities of disability.

I believe an emerging interest in reading disability in Beckett must locate discussions of embodiment as a means to reconsider/reshape modernism in terms of its “misfits.” Much of the archival, quasi-biographical criticism around Beckett’s experiences with disability helps romanticize notions of a suffering genius author-function – where disabilities in his characters help assert authorial literary abilities. While more recent criticism (including Quayson’s) explores Murphy in terms of schizophrenia, depression, autism and Asperger’s, oscillation between metaphorical, philosophical readings of his work and disability studies perspectives (although few) brings productive tension. As Quayson offers to “challenge a tendency in the criticism of [Beckett’s] work to move away from discussions of impairment [where] physical and mental disability is assimilated into a variety of philosophical categories in such a way as to obliterate the specificity of the body” (“Autism” 841), Winship believes “Murphy is an autobiographical characterisation of Beckett’s own meanderings and is probably more intriguing as a psychological sketch of his intellectual and artistic development than as a literary achievement in its own right” (344). Disavowing disabled bodies and experiences as immaterial to an understanding of a text by centralizing its cultural value as a fascinating exercise in an author’s personal development, I believe, helps diminish the literary value

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of those representations on and beyond the page. Here, sociotextual inequity accrues within a qualitative argument that diminishes the value of the text’s characters and their disabilities by locating dominant readerly interest in Beckett’s genius author function. In the context of Beckett’s history of therapy, Winship claims “Murphy’s own suicide” (which Quayson reads as an accident) “was an ominous portent of what might have been [for Beckett]” (350). Doing so attends to a cultural imaginary of individual salvation from disability through medical intervention in spite of larger critiques of institutional oppression, compulsory labour and ableism within the book.

Carrie Sandahl, Susan Wendell and others rightly critique employment of representations without power, or as Wendell suggests those that “deny or ignore bodily experience in favour of fascination with bodily representations” (44). To help ensure that a return to the body and its experiences in this way brings multidimensionality, and in order to move Beckett’s Murphy beyond a half-century upon the representational plain, I propose (following some brief historical and “institutional” context) a walk through moments of the text that touch upon embodiment, economy and, to borrow from Quayson, implications of the social universe around us. His observation that Beckett “return[s] to the impaired human body as means of framing a series of concerns of a creative and philosophical kind” (57) allows space to discuss the novel’s critique of the then (as now) contemporaneous biopolitical mythology (with dire repercussions) around a healthy, able, sociopolitical body and workforce. Understanding Beckett and modernism via disability is significant given our era of late-capitalism’s cultural dominance, most recently framed as a fearful array of local, national and global crises solvable only in economic terms. By literally and physically “not working” for much of the text, Murphy, in part due to his impairments and “able-bodied” cynicism towards labour’s “slave markets” (76), embodies anti-capitalist, anti-heteronormative subject positions. His relative inaction and poverty illustrate the very real exclusivities of ableism. The difficulties of his own (to borrow from Snyder and Mitchell) entry into a market system as a disabled consumer require reading his narrative more specifically than as an apolitical, emblematic “everyman” toiling under modern conditions. In fact, via its title character finding work in the MMM and succeeding in spaces of disability largely through dignified

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62 Not entirely problem-free, a recent request from Edith Miller at the University of Pennsylvania seeks to compile a list of works of contemporary fiction featuring disabled characters whose dimensionality is similar to non-disabled characters. Some of the criteria suggest “The character with a disability must be an adult and a protagonist, or main character [and] must be three-dimensional and engage in the same type of experiences, problems, emotions and relationships as have countless fictional characters without disabilities” (Personal email).
social interdependence, *Murphy’s* positive representations of mental illness and disability evade medical and economic models of fixing problems of and to the body — in spite of significant biopolitical history and literary criticism that suggests otherwise.

Borrowing from Paul Gilroy’s idea of the Black Atlantic, Mitchell and Snyder’s notion of a “Eugenic Atlantic” (101) outlines significant biopolitical, transnational efforts — culminating in the Third Reich — to establish a white, male and biologically “fit” standard for western European and North American societies through systematic institutionalization, sterilization, relocation, experimentation upon, and killing of “inferior stock” (89). Within such a context — as the anti-hero of a pre/post WWII text — Murphy’s resistance to finding a regular job, settling down with his girlfriend and making financial ends meet, is seldom attributed to the limitations of his body and/or mind. In spite of Celia, his prostitute partner’s “desire to make a man of [him]” (65) by encouraging his gainful employment (rather than sex), Murphy (and other of the novel’s characters) illuminates dysfunction as readable commodity — as work in itself. He affirms and repels a range of ableisms and biopolitical imperatives by depending on the support of others while also wanting to help patients at the MMM. His success through inclusive-minded “over-involvement” in “incisive and touching” (Winship 346) ways challenges the maintenance and erasure of disability as a biological, sociocultural and economic problem or burden whose threat disappears from public spaces through cure or confinement.

Such “a pimping for the money-bags” disposition of Murphy and his narrator throughout the text indicates an economic and biopolitical critique of late-1930’s London that he shares with most of his impoverished acquaintances. Together they materialize a collective resistance to the individual economic imperatives of ablebodiedness and much of the book features various tensions and scenes around Murphy’s “immanent labour” (Hardt and Negri 396). Within a context of late-capitalism’s demands for a stable (often able) identity (while its demands upon the body push towards its instability), Murphy’s capital becomes synonymous with his dysfunctional body. By exploring how work supplants transcendence — or, what Murphy seeks in his semi-climactic “butterfly kiss” (249) with the schizophrenic Mr. Endon — the book also exposes myths of joy-through-

63 Susan Schweik’s exceptional text, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (2008), traces the historical and systematic enforcement of “the so-called ‘ugly-laws’ that prohibited people with noticeable physical disabilities from visiting public spaces” (Murray qtd. in 4). Such laws were also “inclusive” of keeping other less-noticeable deviancies such as mental illness and begging off the streets in (primarily US) cities.
labour following Murphy’s adherence to Celia’s demands that he get a job. With his infamous opening line, “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new” (1), Beckett establishes a critique of compulsory economic participation in comical and dramatic ways and sets out various situations and spaces where “no Murphy could work” (21). Idealistically (and aesthetically) speaking, Tyrus Miller describes Murphy as “a portrait of the artist who no longer works [and that his] art is expressed […] in not working” (186). Invocations of Joyce aside, other than a passing reference to the fact that “His books, his pictures, his postcards, his musical scores and instruments all had been disposed of in that order rather than the chair” (189), Murphy’s artistic depiction and/or output – if any – might derive from the ways he manages his limited resources by selling them, and from how he manages himself by prioritizing means to “avoid exhaustion” (138) and calm his problematic heart.

Given years of discourse around Murphy and his emblematic inadequacy under the conditions of a modern world, little to no discussion exists on what the text itself declares about values of embodiment, economy and the construction of those perilous conditions. Presumably, from an ableist perspective, the pressures of finding work and settling down drive him “mad” – or, more accurately, to seek his “race” (169) behind the walls of a sanatorium. His living arrangement involves his landlady sending “exquisitely cooked accounts to Mr. Quigley,” the building’s owner, “and handing over the difference, less a reasonable commission, to Murphy” (64). Such skimming at the expense of a “money-bags” allows for him to live happily and on his own terms – until the semi-welcome arrival of Celia. As the narrator confirms, “This superb arrangement [with his landlady] enabled [Murphy] to consume away at pretty well his own gait, but was inadequate for a domestic establishment, no matter how frugal” (19). Though Beckett’s employment of gait works as a clever synonym for pace or tempo, the idiomatic phrase is replete with cultural values. In _Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge_, Petra Kuppers visits Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire and the turtle-walking _flâneur_ of late nineteenth century Paris. Such insistence upon walking turtles in busy arcades suggests metaphorically the project of disability performance. As a transgressor of conventional spaces, the _flâneur_ disrupts oppressor/oppressed, negative/positive representations. As Kuppers suggests, “Within the larger game plan of city life, turtle walking in the city is a minor, tactical insertion into a systemic whole” (2). As a performative critique of the pace of life under urban

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64 The narrator also describes him as “a strict non-reader” (234).
capitalism, Murphy’s “turtle-walking” of sorts also challenges normative bodily expectations as artistic and social critique by playing with ideas of gait and modernist art practice. Arguably, much of Murphy’s tension occurs out of a hetero-normalizing impulse, as part of what McRuer refers to as a “compulsory able-bodiedness” (93), in which Murphy does not want to participate. Under late-capitalist logic, however, he has little choice. Materializing disability within often-apolitical Beckett scholarship helps locate values in emergent and established cultural fields and becomes an exercise in articulating territory. I am particularly interested in how physicality marks (and makes) social class in both the cultural imaginary of fiction and of the job world. If, while contemplating a spiky fencepost on a Sunday afternoon, Murphy’s “figure so excited the derision of a group of boys playing football in the road that they stopped their game” (143), then his embodiment creates a potentially dangerous situation beyond spectacle.

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu suggests a person embodies class “by a certain breadth of gesture, posture and gait” (218). If so, then what do Beckett’s often uncertain characterizations tell us? If the physical movements of Murphy, Celia, Cooper and others indicate their economic mobility then the significance held in their gaits becomes a means to read cultural values and assumptions of disability, or of one’s profession. Mindful of Ong’s fictional layering of reader and author, how do readers – and by extension their cultures and communities – fictionalize and/or imbue a walk with meaning and, what values are present? Murphy’s “gait” happily balances his own consumption and – recalling his satirical “able-bodied postures” (76) – his unease with the demands of mobility. As Winnie’s exclamation – “What a curse, mobility!” – from Beckett’s *Happy Days* reminds us, there are alternative possibilities to ablebodied demands. Murphy’s subsequent, economically determined, domestic inadequacies also imply he must somehow change his gait, or achieve a more normative figure to provide for his partner. In other words, he must walk the walk. Celia’s

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65 As a contemporary, neoliberal analogue altering human behaviour in favour of individual-replacing-society ontology, Margaret Thatcher employs a frightening scenario: “Economics are the method . . . but the object is to change the soul” (qtd. in Harvey 23).
66 Here, I am mindful of both Raymond Williams’ “Dominant, Residual, Emergent” and Pierre Bourdieu’s “The Field of Cultural Production.”
67 Murphy’s embodiment resonates for Celia in a more charismatic way as “She watched him multiplied in their burlesque long after her own eyes could see him no more” (143).
68 Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif” (1983) challenges readers’ cultural and stereotypical assumptions of race without declaring colour.
employment also imbricates economy with embodiment, again with a sense of unease. Beckett writes:

she preferred sitting in [Murphy's rocking] chair, steeping herself in . . . faint eddies [of light] until they made an amnion about her own disquiet, to walking the streets (she could not disguise her gait) or wandering in the Market [and its] frenzied justification of life as an end to means. (66-7)

How Celia (and her narrator) marks her body through her walk also links her, inextricably, to the market. As Hardt and Negri suggest “There are no time clocks to punch on the terrain of biopolitical production” (403), and Celia’s perpetual awareness of how her mobility defines her also frames misogynistic perceptions as normative while challenging cultural assumptions and values of a gait that is impossible to hide. Controlling life through work – and always being “at work” – as a biopolitical “cost” of the market place has sociopolitical and spatial implications for all. Work-generated movement – or as Wendell might suggest, “pace of life” (37) seldom considers people for whom walking down a street, for example, is not easy, possible or desirable.

Do prostitutes embody prostitution because of their walk? Must a limp signify pain and suffering? And, how might such assumptions differ according to experience? Thinking of Bourdieu’s notion that gait and posture indicate class and status, a gait, performs, or embodies choices for its audiences and critics. Returning to White’s appropriative “embracing of insanity” for Murphy, ascribing disability as a choice places the onus of impairment upon the person rather than upon the normative sociopolitical, cultural and economic space he or she occupies. Similar to Wendell’s concerns, disability performance theorist Carrie Sandahl notes,

disabilities always signify beyond the conditions themselves [and] people with disabilities find it especially frustrating when other marginalized groups use disability metaphors to signify their own “otherness” without an accompanying consideration of actual people with disabilities. (Sandhal 13-4)

Here, double standards of disability as a choice are seemingly not available to other identities such as race or sexuality, and – like Beresford’s foregrounding of psychiatric institution survivors losing their identity by being “colonized” by disability studies – illustrates that differences are important to maintain identity, even as neoliberal logic implores us “all” to desire similar things. How tensions of disability make claims upon the body, and how – considering Celia’s apparent inability to hide her gait – a performance of profession, of ability, or of disability, brings different meanings for different communities and suggests that we do not all long to be upwardly mobile.
Just as Celia might not “embrace” her gait (like an ableist reading of Murphy’s relationship to madness), Cooper, Murphy’s at-times-adept pursuer and semi-drunken information gatherer, also imbricates his economy with his embodiment – without relishing his locomotion. Beckett writes:

[Cooper] recognised Celia as she swaggered past. He let her get well ahead and then started after her, his gait more frustrated than ever as he forced himself to keep his distance. He could not help gaining on her, he had to stop every now and then to let her get on. (151)

While Cooper has narrative interest in Celia as a means to locate Murphy (and perhaps interest in her employment), his “frustrated” gait challenges cultural values in unexpected ways when read from an experiential perspective of disability. His spectacular description as a “low-sized [. . .] grey-faced, one-eyed man [who is] triorchous69 [and has] a curious hunted walk, like that of a destitute diabetic in a strange city [who] never s[its] down” (54), though exhaustive, does not hinder his role as a tracker. More importantly, his body dictates his behaviour in ways that privilege unique embodiment over ablebodied normalcy and pathological perspectives.

Beckett’s personal experiences with disability also figure into characterizations in Murphy. According to Culik, “Cooper’s embodiment of May Beckett’s debilitating disease” (Culik, “Raining and Midnight” 144) appears in detail numerous times. His often quick pace and refusal to sit throughout the novel – except once (254) – Beckett defines as a long-term “acathisia” (119) and his gait as “springheeled as though he longed to run” (26). Cooper’s “leaden” (26) appearance, along with his tense muscles and repetitive speech, suggests an authorial familiarity with Parkinson’s (Culik 143). Though such medically focused historical readings of Beckett and Murphy enforce the pathological gaze,70 they also expose opportunities to encourage disability-centred bodily discourse in his works. Cooper’s central role in the text and unabashed physicality helps dimensionalize textual representations of disability simply by being a character who is adequate at his job and for whom disability is not a primary concern. Moving past stereotypical discussions of impairment in this way brings new meaning to Beckett’s work. For example, Cooper’s characterization via one disability (or identity) in terms of another (Parkinson’s/diabetes/urban life), though problematic on one level (as Sandhal

69 Being “triorchous,” which means having three testicles (and perhaps the third in Cooper’s case is a hernia [Culik, “Medical” 93]) may also inform his gait and his preference for standing.
70 Near the end of Murphy, Beckett describes the surgeon attending Murphy’s autopsy, Doctor Killiecrankie, as having “eyes red with straining for degenerative changes” (258, emphasis my own) – perhaps from years of asserting a medical gaze.
might concur), also links disability with poverty on another level – a seldom-shared perspective in fiction.  

The stories of disability informing Beckett’s characters help establish that he (along with Murphy and Cooper) is no stranger to the medical model of disability, and indeed that familiarity might bring contempt. In what I believe is an overlooked discussion, Culik notes “Murphy, Wylie, Kelly, Cooper and Dew are names of relatively well-known physicians [and] eponyms for different operations, instruments, procedures, signs, methods, or tests” (91-2). Murphy’s seeming preoccupation with exploring bodily afflictions and struggles within constraints of medical nomenclature, I believe, critiques the medical and institutional imperatives to normalize the body and its behaviours, in part by offering more dimensionalized characters. This position, though not entirely unique for a work of fiction, possesses contemporary importance to cultural understandings and outcomes of disability. In Contesting Recognition, Janice McLaughlin, Peter Phillimore and Diane Richardson discuss disability communities’ varied responses to the role of genetics and identity, suggesting:

Some groups appear to have taken on the mantle of the biological citizen, campaigning around the need for stem cell science to cure such conditions as Parkinson’s [while] other groups argue it is important to be wary of such promises and possibilities and focus their politics instead on the demand that disabled people be [as Rapp and Ginsburg suggest] ‘positively incorporated into the social body’. (10)

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71 George Orwell’s anthropological exploration of poverty in Down and Out in London and Paris (1933), while providing a temporal analogue to Murphy, quite contrastingly, places disability at the bottom of a grim, ableist, misogynistic hierarchy. He writes, “Cut off from the whole race of women, a tramp feels himself degraded to rank of a cripple or a lunatic. No humiliation could do more damage to a man’s respect” (204).

72 By comparison, I return briefly to Popp’s idea of Lawrence’s “distinctive brand of modernism” (50) and, while we are still on our walk, her inclusion of significant passage from Lady Chatterley has about the significance of legs. Lawrence writes:

Connie woke up to the existence of legs. They became more important to her than faces, which are no longer very real. How few people had live, alert legs! She looked at the men in the stalls, great puddingy thighs in black pudding-cloth, or lean, wooden sticks in black funeral stuff. Or well-shaped young legs without any meaning whatever. Either sensuality or tenderness or sensitiveness, just mere leggy ordinariness that pranced around. They were all daunted out of existence. But the women were not daunted. The awful mill-posts of most females! Really shocking, really enough to justify murder! Or the thin pegs! Or the trim, neat things in silk stockings without the slightest look of life! Awful, the millions of meaningless legs, prancing meaninglessly around! (274)

Here, gait, locomotion, limbs and their appearance emulate their rant-like, comical depiction. Her privileging of legs – and their functionality – over faces coincides with the book’s privileging of sexually able virility over impotent disability.

73 Marking a form of potentially-life saving embodiment, a contemporary trend of “medical ink” (Harris) or tattoos that identify diabetics, for example, is on the rise.
Using the employment and critical discourse of Parkinson’s in Murphy as an example, thinking through disability in terms of the spaces, histories, accomplishments and tensions it occupies, as the above comment illustrates, is also important outside of the text. Fiction’s role in critiquing eugenics, institutionalization or imperatives of work-ability will benefit – to use a biopolitical term of oppression – from greater “investment” in a more inclusive social body. If, as I have shown, Beckettian “society” embodies disability’s awkward, wonderful and unusual ways, it also allows us to move past stereotypical discussions of impairment to consider experiences of marginalized labour and oppressive social spaces and practices. Experiential and materialist readings of disability (within and without Beckett’s imagination and histories of disability) become difficult through metaphorical and ableist frames. The resulting exposure of sociotextual inequity invites resistance to state-sanctioned biopolitical efforts to ensure (via a range of corrective efforts) a normative society, while also challenging how we as readers, for example, “read” someone’s gait. Thus, the concept of sociotextual inequity allows cultural texts to teach us hidden assumptions, feelings and failures of social policy while insisting upon new correlations such as disability, poverty and perception in order to embrace a wider range of embodiments – much like Murphy at work.

Murphy’s leaving home and the social and moral support of Celia, perpetuates instability – a theme often shared by the observations of others and reflective of his experiences around immanent labour. His characterization as more than “merely indolent” (31) relative to employment, Celia’s reflection that “Murphy said work would be the end of them both” (22), and his friend Neary’s revelation that “The last time I saw him, [. . .] he was saving up for a Drinker respiration machine to get into when he was fed up breathing” (49), complements his role as a “parody of rational behavior” (110). Sharing a range of embodiments from a relatively familiar “body fussy with fatigue” (189) to “fe[eling] parts of his body [. . .] fidgeting to be off” (115) and “rolling around the floor [in a] fit” (140), suggests his experiences, while unstable, also defy furniture or other forms of physical constraint. Near the close of the novel, during a kite-flying scene, a disabled and elderly Mr. Kelly takes to his wheelchair as a welcome source of mobility rather than as an ableist limitation. Beckett writes: “He was as fond of his chair in his own way as Murphy had been of his” (277). From a disability studies perspective, such a parallel offers a positive sociocultural alternative to the problematic and still often-used false phrase “confined to a wheelchair.” Imagining those of us who use wheelchairs as
incarcerated by them perpetuates negative values in spite of the spatial agency assistive technologies can bring.

Similarly, within an institutionalized space of confinement, Murphy’s job as a male nurse at the MMM (through a serendipitous meeting with Ticklepenny) allows for a significant critique of mental illness and its treatment. By thinking of “the impaired human body as means of framing a series of concerns of a creative and philosophical kind” (Quayson 57), a significant “concern” of Beckett’s work asks how medicalized institutional space treats and/or values its people. The creation and maintenance of eugenics and institutionalization exist as social, political and economic correctives to the social panic over a mythical corruption of the social body. Biopolitically and ethically speaking, “madness becomes enclosed in a medical and moral space” (Carlson 122), and illustrates the importance of advocating for more equitable conditions by sharing experiences. As Davidson offers,

Although liberal theories of social justice imply equal access to the public sphere, they do not account for individuals who, because of cognitive impairment or physical disability cannot cooperate on “equal” and independent terms. Nor are dependant relations validated in the common weal. Citizens who need special accommodations are often stigmatized as narcissists, whiners, and drains on public funds. (55,6)

Murphy’s successes as a caregiver (through Beckett’s narrative advocacy) provide a model for more equitable treatment of mental and physical disabilities. As such, Murphy provides space to work out Davidson’s encouragements of dependency in perpetually tight economic times. The short-term help Murphy provides reveals the dominant corrective view of disability-as-problem within a larger lack of economic, social and educational resources – which ultimately affect patient care. Ticklepenny’s “pompous dread of being driven mad by the spectacle constantly before him of those that were so already” motivates him to suggest Murphy (who needs little encouragement, in this case) take his job in a place that has difficulty “like other mental hospitals to procure nurses.” While speaking satirically to a lack of suitable support, Beckett continues: “[Ticklepenny’s] only qualifications for handling the mentally deranged were the pot poet’s bulk and induration to abuse.” His humorous, if ironic, “qualifications” suggest his unsuitability for the job while also encouraging a sense of patient cooperation towards improving conditions. Beckett writes: “even in the MMM there were not many patients so divorced from reality that they could not discern and vituperate a Ticklepenny in their midst” (91). Although the novel’s third person perspective imparts a “telling” distance,
especially in terms of ability speaking for disability, brief moments of patient empowerment, albeit as limited justice, certainly oppose the biopolitical and hierarchical ideology governing Murphy’s new workplace.

In spite of there being “no facts in the M.M.M. except those sanctioned by a doctor,” including death, (159), a pseudo-guru-like nurse takes time to “mix with them, touch them, speak to them, watch them, imagine himself one of them” (240). And he does this all apparently while, as Beckett writes, never los[ing] sight of the fact that he was dealing with patients not responsible for what they did or said [for whom] seeing so much of the nurses and so little of the doctor it is natural that they should regard the former as their prosecutors and the latter as their savior. (158)

Beckett offers a relationship between nurse/patient and doctor/patient that privileges compassion and gestures towards equality and mutual respect between those who occupy the institutional space. Murphy’s narrator calls into question the rehabilitative success of the hospital’s “therapeutic voodoo.” While a problematic phrase, not following the abstractions of the medical model and its script have very real consequences as those patients not “cooperating in the routine of the wards’ [. . .] were liable to get hell all night” (238). Winship adds to the routine/punishment discussion by suggesting Murphy provides instruction for alleviating institutional tensions, noting:

themes of patient engagement, staff involvement […] are apposite for the continuing challenge of psychiatric staff especially faced with the most intensive levels of patient contact. The question of who is indeed mad, or the ritualistic practice of the asylum as a defence against intimacy, are all sub-plots in the novel that anticipate by some decades [future] critique[s] of the asylum system. (346)

Such revelations lend new perspectives to those labeling Beckett’s work absurdist, and instead insist upon challenging absurd structures of power that diminish the rights of people. Beckett’s sociopolitical and medical critique at the height of modernism’s “logical” trade in eugenics encourages an understanding of how representations of disability and mental illness can “signify their own ‘otherness’ [and] conside[r] actual people with disabilities” (Sandhal 13-4), however uneasy at times. Beckett’s inclusive representations of disability help rectify Sandhal’s (and others’) concerns. In this regard, Forman’s Cuckoo’s Nest once again provides a useful, closing example of how madness gets wrapped up and sold as compulsory heteronormativity/ability – something that Murphy and Celia do not conform to.

McMurphy’s covert Christmas party for the patients (which involves sneaking in alcohol,
and two prostitutes – Candy and Rose) presents what Eunjung Kim calls “prostitute-as-rehabilitator logic” (140): a way for a disabled man (in this case, Billy via Candy) to overcome his disability and feel better about himself. Such often-overlooked scenarios illustrate the importance (and negation) of Beckett’s biopolitical critiques amidst Hollywood fixes for madness that follow from Murphy.

Is It Time to Rethink Murphy’s Law?

“One thing you can’t hide is when you’re crippled inside” (John Lennon)

“If I go insane, please don’t put your wires in my brain” (Roger Waters)

“How various are the ways of looking away!” (Murphy 264)

In her research on stories from asylums of the 1800s, Sara Newman recalls some strikingly contemporary concerns for people “rehabilitating” behind walls and how they arrived there in the first place. She observes patients who, after their release and from their own experiences [provide an account of] how they were held by the “system” because of their perceived disabilities; having gained freedom of body and voice, they [also] advocate for reforming that system and challenge the cultural misconceptions about [their] mental, physical, and cognitive disabilities. (263)

Newman also notes that a general aim of treatment was to improve “character and health since, according to the prevalent approach, these elements were linked” (265). After 150 years of “prevalent” methodologies ensuring healthy minds and bodies is it surprising that Beresford notes with great concern that in present-day Britain community care “is perceived politically as a failure” and that the “‘mental health’ debate has been dominated by a small number of high profile homicides linked with mental health service users” (160)? Although he notes the number of incidents has actually decreased, how might we counter problematic messages, images and normative uptake of disproportionate media reports?

How we challenge and change “cultural misconceptions” of a range of disabilities, I believe, can occur with the stories we read and how we share, apply and dimensionalize their representations as significant and culturally viable and valuable

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74 Ironically, perhaps, McMurphy’s insistence upon the act delays his escape, leading to his punishment, lobotomy and murder.

75 For example, Newman considers the writing of Amos Swan (in 1874), and Anna Agnew (in 1887) (263).
beyond the text as well. My invocation of “Murphy’s Law” (which emerged as a popular catch-phrase in the 1950s as a signifier of “what can go wrong will go wrong”) does not signify Murphy’s failure as a lesson for normative society (as much of the book’s theoretical discourse might suggest). Rather, I wish to assert the ways in which Beckett’s novel aligns with productive embodiments of disability and critiques inadequate support systems. In order to ensure mutual respect and dignity across communities, what can go right should go right.

Amidst a history – and present – of inequality and failure to recognize dependency as a plausible “community in a post-ableist era” (Davidson 57) – or what Davis calls a dismodern era which “aims to create a new category based on the partial, incomplete subject whose realization is not autonomy and independence but dependency and inter-dependence” (30), it is important to intervene in the cultural (mis)information about disabilities and the power of their representation in literature. Either way, successful stories of disability “integration” negate the need for social systems of interdependence even as the necessary closure of the Laconia School for human rights abuses is framed as one of economic rationale. As though made in the image of biopolitical, individualist, economic “progress” which negates images and narratives of deficiency at every turn, the Laconia State School facility is now a state jail. Arguably, it always was.

Homogeneous representations of ability and achievement shared by modernism and neoliberalism alike fail to account for disabled variations of embodiment within an ableist model of success (or culturally share them as such), unless that person exceeds established standards of ability. Whether supercrip or proselytized via “dismodern” technologies or a miracle existence (often due to geography and wealth), it seems those with disabilities who do not meet such beyond-able standards are often sequestered to “special and unique” status (rather than as statues) where glorious individual accomplishments vaunted by many become an individual problem, hopefully fixable, or at least coped with, along social-welfare-burden lines of thinking.

While no supercrips abound in Murphy (although Cooper’s drunken fastidiousness, or Murphy’s communicability might qualify), the dominant critical discourse surrounding the novel still reinforces ability and individualism in the image of people who do not appear in the text. In spite of its cast’s collective nature and moments of social support many readings perceive Murphy’s failings as idiosyncratic or symptomatic of an “ordinary life” which, while helping the able-bodied among us feel
better about ourselves, efface his very real problems as a disabled character and his tragic, more than comic, passing. But, how does such a compelling character – albeit decades later – become so cryptically popular? Many older, enigmatic readings of Beckett reveal (as I have discussed) various stages of bodily denial with metaphors and binaries in the spaces of the often flustered, joyous and decaying mentalities and physicalities of Beckett’s characters. Murphy’s uneasy and promising place in modernism suggests that canonical authors and texts have much to teach us regarding disability studies as cultural criticism and minority empowerment – to counter the idea and practice that disability is much easier to ignore than to address.

Enacting ‘the curse of mobility’ with potentially dire consequences – Jack Nicholson as “McMurphy” in One Flew Over the Cuckoos’ Nest and Rosaleen Linehan as “Winnie” in Happy Days (from Beckett on Film).
Chapter Two:
You Can’t Show That: Freaking Priceless Babies, False Equalities and What Disability Buys on Film

When the going gets rough, it’s only the size of your heart that counts (from trailer for Tiptoes).

Accepting his Golden Globe Award for “Best supporting Actor in a Drama Series” in January 2012, Peter Dinklage mentioned – above the orchestra pit’s swell of strings cueing him offstage – “a gentleman [he’d] been thinking about in England. His name is Martin Henderson. Google him.” (“Peterr Dinklage Wins”). Doing so reveals that Henderson is also a dwarf actor; however, his health and career prospects have diminished after being picked up and thrown to the ground while smoking a cigarette during birthday celebrations outside a Somerset pub. A January 13, 2012 story in The Telegraph, “Dwarf blames Mike Tindall for inspiring attack,” sympathizes with Henderson’s ordeal and exposes tensions between a privileged, able culture’s assault against him, and presumably others like him.

The article and its title manifest negative cultural values for disability and its relationships with ability by identifying Henderson – now someone “who faces having to use a wheelchair” (Wardrop) – as a dwarf first and as a victim of violence and diminished employment later. It also calls out Mike Tindall, a member of the English royal family through recent marriage, and a now-former member of England’s national rugby team. His participation (along with other members of the team) at a New Zealand pub’s “Mad Midget Weekender,” which consists of “‘leprechaun bar wars’ and midgets with bungee cords racing each other” (Jones), also generates several reports suggesting the event included dwarf tossing. Similar, seldom-discussed spectacles – often justified as economically beneficial – occur elsewhere, though the socioeconomic and media

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76 He received it, along with an Emmy a month earlier, for playing the popular Game of Thrones’ character Tyrion Lannister, who, according to the New York Times is “the closest thing to a hero in HBO’s epic swords-and-sex hit” (Kois).
77 Though the bar staff denied it in this case, the activity often involves participants who hurl dwarves onto padding or a Velcro wall.
78 A recent article from the National Post shares comments from an attendee who uneasily justifies his own presence along with dwarves’ exploitation through presumed economic gain suggesting he “had to leave the spectacle because he felt offended and was only attending . . . because friends strongly urged him to.” He says, “It just didn’t seem like [the person being thrown] was enjoying it . . . I was getting a bad vibe from the whole situation . . . [b]ut I mean,
repercussions might be less available for audiences to consider. Either way, such acts divide along lines of privilege and ability to generate largely uncontested, heteroableist, masculinist spaces where disability’s exploitation maintains its inequitable cultural employment.

These images of dwarf-tossing events at Leopard’s Lounge in Windsor, Ontario, feature a performer named “Tripod.” Each image also shows the physical and symbolic disempowerment at work in the dwarf entertainment industry: the harnessed performer is not in control of his own body and wears costumes – from Christmas elf to infant – that fictionalize and infantilize his embodiment. Each photo also privileges the act of Tripod being thrown (rather than picture of him not being thrown) and the perspective of the throwers – while others presumably cheer and take in the spectacle. The image on the right is from an event in January 2012 that drew 1000 spectators (photos: Dax Melmer, National Post, Larry Kaplan, Toronto Star).

One particular sport-friendly report sanctions the English rugby team’s actions as “a good old-fashioned boys night out” (Gubba). This perception becomes more acute given Henderson’s request that “The whole team should be made to apologise for what they have done [and] until someone steps out and says ‘this is not acceptable’, all dwarfs are under threat” (Wardrop). Notably, his assailant has not been identified or caught. Further, the connection Henderson makes between Tindall’s publicized behaviour in a space where dwarves become stereotypical, romanticized playthings akin to modern-day jesters – or, one-dimensional props reasserting a reactionary old-fashioned nostalgia for “the boys” – validates a long history of exploitive, atypical “royal” behaviour.

Although Tindall was chastised and fined for his actions, reports of his sexual infidelity at the event imbue a heteronormative, culturally endorsed misogynistic form of athletic “ability” into the story. As a supposed (high) cultural role model, his ushering off the cultural stage, so to speak, avoids a public opportunity to question his (and others’) especially in this economy, if you’re getting paid to do something, do it. But try to do something that you’re happy doing” (Wright).
participation in and views of an arguably exploitive event. Rather than creating a space for him to use his social position to challenge – or learn from – oppressive behaviours, the issue resolves itself through troubling media-sanctioned “boys will be boys” sentiment echoed by several of his teammates and the comment sections of online sports pages. Doing so privileges the national importance of successful rugby while the crime against Henderson and its ableist links languish as a sympathetic afterthought – placing the problem and onus of impairment upon the victim. Individualizing disability in this way diminishes or avoids any discussion – save Dinklage’s gesture (or a rare considerate response in an article’s comment section) – of how public exploitation of disability might bring harm to Henderson and others like him. The act and its treatment in the media also signal a very real need to understand disabled ontology beyond stereotypes.

If increasingly familiar neoliberal, ableist discourse attends to popular culture’s economically palatable idea of people “just doing their jobs” – whether a drunk rugby player or a harnessed dwarf thrown across a pub – such false equality also effaces and reinforces problematic stereotypes of ability and disability with little consideration of the spatial, socioeconomic and cultural relationships that govern such “choices.” In other words, a dominant, heteroableist culture that constrains both rugby players and dwarves to “playing their parts” brings real consequences to those who challenge such roles. In this chapter, I discuss Peter Dinklage, an actor who regularly turns down stereotypical “elf” roles, and his starring role as “Tyrion Lannister” in the HBO series Game of Thrones as a problematic example of heteronormative success in the film/television industry. I also offer a brief survey of disability and its functions in a few artistically and commercially successful (and not so successful) films to argue against industry-enforced representations of normalcy. I read Dinklage’s role as “Finbar McBride,” or “Fin,” in The Station Agent (2003) alongside some of the sideshow and circus performers in Tod Browning’s Freaks (1932), showing how, despite the seventy years between them, they share analogous characterizations of ability-as-disability or “normal-as-freak/freak-as-normal,” and feature actors who forge careers in spite of, and because of, their disabilities. While some disability-in-film discourse touches upon disabled characters at

79 In the comedy Elf (2003), Dinklage plays formidable children’s author Miles Finch, who physically assaults Buddy (Will Ferrell) – a character from the North Pole who thinks he is also an elf – after Buddy repeatedly refers to Finch as an elf. Buddy’s “earnestness” and Finch’s reaction reveal tensions and absurdities inherent in fictional representations of dwarves and their uptake in the cultural imaginary.
“normative” work in non-stereotypical ways (in *Freaks*, at least), I believe — and as the films’ spatial universes explore — such representation makes historical and sociotextual inequities legible. These spaces become most clear, for example, when the representational power of disability onscreen has no analogue or agency on the street.

With Henderson’s oppression in mind, this chapter explores how disability theory considers filmic materializations of bodily, sexual and cultural tensions in ableist terms in social spaces. From overlooked issues of accessibility, such as being able to reach a mailbox, to a “little person” in a drunken, sad or angry moment of stereotypical de-sexuality, *The Station Agent* and *Freaks* affirm and challenge prejudices towards people with disabilities. While performance, perspective, set design, camera and other technologies may normalize disability (or disable ability), a similar sense of false equality can govern roles for disabled people as working actors. A central thread of my discussion, then, considers how heteronormative, saleable dictates of “available role choices” often reinforce normative expectations on film. Akin to Henderson’s reported plight making him a site for sympathy in comparison to Tindall’s more largely acceptable or palatable infidelities, each film — and others I touch upon — posits an unfulfilled narrative expectation of requisite heterosexual normalcy, or coupling, between disability and ability, often resolving in sympathy for the disabled character. While such manufactured tensions create very compelling moments on film by threatening ideas of “compulsory ablebodiedness” (McRuer), they also (re)affirm disability as sexually impotent. Even as both *The Station Agent* and *Freaks* share a history of making and marketing a representationally possible romance between a male character of diminutive stature and a typically-sized female lead, they also contribute to a history of films that normalize disability through heteronormative sexuality.

Throughout this chapter, I contextualize some of the production history and reception of each film. Considering how *The Station Agent* almost never got made because of its male lead’s diminutive stature, in addition to how the poor critical reaction to the “freakish” characters in Browning’s film made it difficult for him to find funding for subsequent films, lends new biopolitical and economic considerations of what audiences consume on screen and what kinds of films get made. Conversely, when a more familiar actor or actress “plays disabled,” a studio’s production concerns seemingly diminish. As a means of untangling the notion that disability played by ability turns to Oscar gold, I borrow from Nicole Markotić and Sally Chivers’s opening to their text *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*. As I note in my introduction, they write “One of the quickest
paths to critical acclaim for an able-bodied actor is to play a physically disabled character in a manner that a largely uninformed audience finds convincing” (1). While their use of the term “uninformed” is in some ways subjective, especially considering Sandhal’s being “fooled” by an able-bodied actor playing disabled. Given Henderson’s “fears his condition will ruin his career” (Wardrop), their “uninformed” claim marks dangerous tensions that, arguably, “convince” some – like Henderson’s assailant – of no distinction between performances and experiences of disability. Might disabled actors in significant non-stereotypical roles encourage an end to oppressive acts that occur beyond the screen and inform the histories and contemporary experiences of disabled actors?

“What’s My Role? I Mean, What’s My Problem?”: Or, Why The Cane Seldom Plays Able

“What I really want is to play the romantic lead and get the girl.” (Dinklage)

Though over a decade old and revisited in a recent New York Times’ interview piece about Peter Dinklage and his work, I find his comment in the above epigraph compelling for a couple of reasons. At the time, his hetero-leading-man aspirations had (to my knowledge) never come to fruition – at least not fully played out onscreen. And, subsequent to his critically acclaimed, starring role as a train expert who inherits and inhabits an unused station house in The Station Agent (which I discuss in greater detail in my next section), his seemingly simple request illustrates mainstream film’s real limitations in providing what I call a “representational possible” reflective of disabled experiences and desires. Though plenty of short-statured men have successful romantic relationships with typically-sized women, their framing in cinema often appears as a semi-comical impossibility. More often than not, the negation or absence of such relationships onscreen gives ample narrative space for heteronormativity and misogyny in various social, cultural and economic forms. Shaping narratives in this way – as a form of normative “replacement” – maintains sociotextual inequities by assuming we all

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80 The initial episode of the Ricky Gervais/Stephen Merchant-written, HBO-produced show, Life’s Too Short, starring dwarf actor Warwick Davis, features a scene where he attempts to normalize domestic relations with his typically-sized soon-to-be ex-wife. Subsequent episodes frame Davis’s character as someone of suspect morality who, often in tragicomic fashion, eschews his similarly statured date to pursue a romantic relationship with a typically-sized female character.
have the same desires. By this logic, desiring, or experiencing anything else is representationally impossible.

In her essay, “A Man, with the Same Feelings,” Eunjung Kim outlines how the impulse/narrative trope of “fixing” disability with heterosexuality works in several films (including her astute observations of McMurphy’s attempt to rehabilitate Billy via prostitution in Forman’s Cuckoo’s Nest). She suggests similar “cultural depictions enforce the sexuality of disability as a unique aspect that differs from non-disabled existence, like many other benign factors of life experience of disabled people” (141, 2). While we all might not hang out our laundry to dry in the same ways – one of the “normalizing,” domestic activities that members of the sideshow in Freaks carry out, for example – we still have to get our washing done. Although I do not intend to trivialize or make disabled sexuality mundane here, Kim’s point helps deflate the “what kind of life would that be?” argument/value judgment working to place or “value” one ontological experience above another. Advocating “a broader view of human sexualities” (55), Michael Rembis suggests disabled sexualities should and “will be equally valued parts of a broad social and cultural mosaic” (59). What if mainstream cinema shared more and different experiences of disabled sexuality onscreen, rather than framing it within (hetero)normative expectations that result in a sort of self loathing for the disabled character?

As a way to absorb, or deflect, a “typical” audience’s normative sociocultural unease around sex and disability, films (including The Station Agent) imply such acts occur off-screen. For example, the recent, marginally commercially successful film, Young Adult (2011), features a liaison between attractive, ablebodied, though “crazy” Mavis (Charlize Theron) and Matt (Patton Oswalt), disabled from a violent assault against him (and his rumored homosexuality). After removing most of their clothes and joining each other in bed, they have sex, presumably. However, a montage of Matt’s homemade superhero action figures – a hetero-centric fantasy many of us (and certainly Matt, we are led to believe) are apparently more comfortable with – replaces the sex part. Arguably, this instance of narrative substitution/disability negation would seldom occur with two ably characterized, Hollywood “A-list” actors appearing in an R-rated film. In contrast, Mavis’s motive to seduce her former boyfriend, Buddy (Patrick Wilson), from

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81 Consult Rembis’s “Beyond the Binary: Rethinking the Social Model of Disabled Sexuality” for ways in which disability, sexuality informs experiences outside of more normative models of sexuality.
his marriage to Ruth (Elizabeth Reaser) and new family often plays out in more public ways – including their kiss on Buddy’s front lawn. After declaring her love for Buddy during a naming party, Mavis is ostracized from her former community. Her revelation to the group in the driveway that, years ago, a miscarriage with Buddy might have been avoided “if things were just a little more hospitable down south in [her] broken body” leads to a further reveal that her invitation to the party was out of sympathy on Beth’s part for, in Buddy’s terms, Mavis’s “suffering.” Does this double negation – her lack of biological “ability” and her “mental instabilities” – allow her coupling with Matt more plausibility from an ableist heteronormative perspective? The resulting sociotextual inequity of their implied sex further mythologizes and devalues sex and disability as a non-threatening behaviour that audiences are presumably “not ready” to believe exists. But, what if they were superheroes instead?

The enforcement of sexual difference based upon performance in film (onscreen or not) and elsewhere brings forth yet another form of cultural ableism – with very real social and biopolitical repercussions. Kim cites Dinklage’s first major role as a productive example of what happens during off-screen sex from a disability studies perspective – stating the importance of less totalizing, rehabilitative prescriptive fixes for a disabled character’s disabled sexuality. She writes:

This is not to suggest that all filmic depictions of disabled people’s [sic] sexuality unfold in the same way. And certainly many films challenge the heteronormative framework of disabled people’s sexuality [like] the portrayal of a sexually inactive short-statured man in The Station Agent which has an ending that implies a potential sexual relationship. (142)

Dinklage’s character spends much of the film negotiating the spaces and stares of small-town New Jersey while also befriending a couple of other social “outsiders”: Olivia (Patricia Clarkson), who is coping with the loss of her son, and failed marriage; and Joe (Bobby Cannavale), who takes care of his ill father and his food truck – most days parked beside Fin’s new home. Along with the film’s devotion to personal relationships rather than pathological histories, and as a result of his charm, humour and “nice chin,” it is quite plausible that Fin’s eventual sexual relationship with local librarian, Emily (Michelle Williams), does happen. We just never experience it onscreen beyond implication and, why not?

Dinklage’s brief statement of intent as an actor “to play the romantic lead and get the girl” – whether serious or tongue in cheek – takes a new then-to-now turn as the
industry-awarded\textsuperscript{82} star of \textit{Game of Thrones}. Though disability and sexuality onscreen generate a range of responses – from sympathy to humour to horror – is a dwarf framed as having sex with a typically-sized actor our time’s Elvis the Pelvis? And considering Dinklage’s apparent good looking, leading man qualities, his at-times sexual role on the show is more conservatively presented than performances of heterosexual sex between more typical bodies. I only ask such a seemingly out of context question because the then-broadcast mandate to shoot an often-gyrating Elvis from the waist up was apparently to quell a for-certain viewer frenzy, or indeed more likely to manufacture sales and social panic. While audiences now have more media to choose from (and any recent Rihanna performance would probably make The King blush), such an analogy works because the censorship of nearly sixty years ago also conflates able sexuality with values of social propriety. Taking into consideration Michael Davidson’s apt connection between “commodification of the body [and] social panic” (201), made in the context of Stephen Frears’s \textit{Dirty Pretty Things} (2002) and the economic parceling of bodily organs, we can observe that the biopolitical impulses of the body on film or TV as a means to reflect or push contemporary sociopolitical moments, and of course, to “entertain,” are governed by capital.

In \textit{Game of Thrones} (and the book series that inspires it), “Tyrion Lannister” is a popular character who reportedly enjoys life’s pleasures. According to the \textit{New York Times} piece, Dinklage’s Tyrion is “the only modern man in a muddy, violent, primal world. He loves good food, good conversation and a good book.” In addition to a busy sexual appetite, his ethos of privilege is notably \textit{not} identified by his physical size. Yet, his role apparently embodies a larger, peaceable and salable cultural identity insofar as “like most HBO subscribers, he would prefer to stay out of battle” (Kois). If corporate media culture can monetize fans of Dinklage’s character (along with a majority of cable consumers) as real pacifists of a fantasy show, then claims of whether or not culture at large is ready for a small leading man become irrelevant amidst a compulsory demand to enjoy (and spend money) onscreen and off. In this case, apparently, a universally shared neoliberal endorsement of consumption is capable of erasing unease around bodily differences and disability.

\textsuperscript{82} Perhaps a sign of changing times, or market share, Dinklage (along with his supporting cast) was nominated for several acting awards after \textit{The Station Agent}, but only his co-stars took home the hardware – the opposite is largely true with \textit{Game of Thrones} thus far.
How might such demands of capital interweave with compulsory ability and heterosexuality? An early episode of Game of Thrones negates Tyrion’s physicality by privileging heterosexual desire and misogynistic behaviour, reinforcing Kim’s critique of films that attempt to rehabilitate disabled men with sex (often with prostitutes). For Tyrion, the process occurs through gastronomical and sexual experiences that many of us – including those who read the New York Times – would presumably like to share. Referring to the episode in which an imposing axe-wielding “Shagga” (Mark Lewis Jones) asks Tyrion, “How would you like to die?,” Kois’s interview quotes most of Tyrion’s response (“In my own bed, at the age of 80, with a belly full of wine’ attended by a woman”) as praise for the show’s writing and as an example of how Dinklage’s character often has the “best lines” in the series. The noticeable editing of the last part of the line, however, becomes problematic in light of what Tyrion actually says. When confronted, he replies, “In my own bed, at the age of 80, with a belly full of wine and a girl’s mouth around my cock” (“The Pointy End”). Such inclusion here, I believe, destabilizes and exposes the article’s rhetorical push to frame the character (and indirectly the actor and his choice of roles) as refreshingly “modern” and “civilized” amongst the show’s fantasy fiction rabble, violence and “filth.” Kois’s (and/or his editor’s) decision to omit overt misogynistic explicitness and replace it with the softer “attended by a woman” – implied subtext or not – erases any illegal sexual connotations of “girl” and sanitizes Dinklage’s character/dialogue as less crass and humorous than he might be for some. Tyrion, however, certainly seems in biopolitical control of his various appetites – or as Kim might suggest, his “heterosexualizing apparatuses” (133). Counter to the normative narrative impulses to read heterosexual activity and coupling as the beginnings of domesticity and cure for ailments that Beckett’s “Murphy” resists, for example, Tyrion’s often compelling ethos of enjoyment and acting out of resource-rich (hetero)sexual fantasy and abuses of power normalizes his ontology as an acceptable model of masculine behaviour onscreen. Kois’s attempts to align Tyrion with “most HBO subscribers” provide a seemingly far-flung yet troubling endorsement of misogyny beyond the screen at quite a remove from their supposed pacifist tendencies.

Questions of heteronormative privilege arise here along with another aspect of the “representative possible” onscreen – that Fin has sex. In The Station Agent, after

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83 Maureen Ryan’s recent piece for the Huffington Post “Who Creates Drama at HBO? Very Few Women Or People Of Color,” notes one show in the network’s forty-year history written by a woman.
sharing some bourbon that she brings to Fin’s as a peace offering for nearly hitting him with her car (twice), Olivia sleeps on Fin’s couch and Fin sleeps in the tub. The next morning, Joe watches a somewhat flustered Olivia depart from Fin’s station house and shouts, “You miss your train last night?” Joe then very quickly appears at Fin’s door, genuinely impressed with Fin’s ability to woo an attractive older woman – encouraging him with a well worn “You’re the man!” comment several times. Closing the door gently and insisting on some privacy, Fin’s non-verbal, slightly impatient response to Joe’s imperative reveals to the audience, but not to Joe, the misdirected sexual encouragement and heterosexual endorsement of an act that does not take place. The double meaning of Joe’s clichéd heterosexual prodding (though humorous) counters (and encounters) stereotypical misogynistic response to a sexual encounter for a character who does not have sex that often. Fin is a man, but as a dwarf – which much of the beginning of the film plays up in interesting ways – he, arguably, unhinges tired stereotypical ideas of the man.

Why justify masculine directives to fill some sports opinion pages with oppressive behaviour towards women or people with disabilities as “lads letting off some steam?”

Given the contemporary commercial success of Game of Thrones, my examples of how selective image handling (and editing) around a disabled actor and his character softens yet maintains heterosexually-able impulses also invites questions of how this “phenomenon” works in (his) other representations and why certain kinds of narratives receive greater attention than others. To compare minorities for a moment, if so few queer actors “come out” in part because of cuts in pay and role-prominence, 84 then, how might similar economic valuations of identity and performance govern cultural understandings of disability? 85 If an actor “becomes able” does his or her stock go up? Theoretical and economic ironies exist in similar structures of ability governing access (and by extension “success”) within the able-ness of disabled actors themselves. Although it might be easier onscreen to pass as straight rather than hide a significant limp or gain two feet in height, the medium and its mechanisms of production create and

84 Rupert Everett mentions that after coming out as gay he was unable to attain significant roles in Hollywood, suggesting “show business is ideally suited for heterosexuals, it’s a very heterosexual business [and] it’s run mostly by heterosexual men, and there’s a kind of pecking order.” (“I Never Got a Job”).

85 Conversely, in the context of disability film festivals, Mitchell and Snyder maintain the importance of “the politics of atypicality,” which they note as “the refusal to remain within the strict boundaries of medically and socially prescribed categories of sameness.” Doing so invigorates “more stagnant efforts to simply substitute dominant devaluing characteristics with ‘positive’ representations.” (“How Do We Get All of These Disabilities in Here?” 14).
enforce real limits upon cultural representation and diversity in our cultural and social spheres. Tindall’s ability-driven sexual intrigue upstages real inequities for Henderson and reveals how heterosexuality and/or sexual ability trump disability without question. Part of the popularity of Dinklage’s “Tyrion” exists because he occupies a traditionally and problematically safe role for a male. While Lennard Davis suggests disability theory does not require Goffman’s *Stigma* any longer – at least as a means of establishing and maintaining structures and relationships based upon performance and privilege – it is important to consider how disability theory exposes hierarchies based upon whiteness, ableness, heterosexuality and wealth. To paraphrase McRuer (2002), in the (filmic, representational) end there is no choice. After all, wouldn’t you rather be like me? Along neoliberal lines, of course, the “choice” is to act and consume and “like” just like the rest of us.

Put another way, Fiona Kumari-Campbell’s take on the concept in her 2009 text, *Contours of Ableism*, suggests

Compulsory ableness and its conviction to and seduction of sameness as the basis to equality claims results in a resistance to consider ontologically peripheral lives as distinct ways of being human lest they produce a heightened devaluation. (131)

Here, aspirations towards an equal access “sameness” of ability and desire (and their representations) exist if disability occupies a lesser value. While I disagree with Kumari-Campbell’s “peripheral lives” designation for disability (as a phrase that contributes to devaluation in this context) and concur (along with McRuer) that disability is, arguably, everywhere, I believe processes of “making similar” devalue disability by negating its threats to an able cultural imaginary. Narrative “replacement” of off-screen sex between a disabled and non-disabled character, for example, maintains the act and its possibilities as inequitable, unattainable, or as something else.

Such carefully managed representation of disability (and questions of, for example, what kind of disability Dinklage’s “sexy” image represents) helps ensure its operation as a foil perpetuating the financialization and/or salability of heterosexual ability. Even as Dinklage is a “good looking” actor, this management structure is multivalent – implicating and shaping disability in palatable, consumable ways for and as part of a “more popular” culture, much (and still) like representations of race and homosexuality decades earlier. In a circa-2004 interview on UK website *Counterculture*, director Tom McCarthy discusses at length the financial and ideological frustrations around the realization of *The Station Agent*, stating:
It was very similar putting the financing together for this film as it would have been making a film with an African-American in the lead 30 years ago, you know, people saying, “Think about this, people aren’t ready to watch a dwarf in the lead role of a movie.” I’d be like “How do you know that?” A lot of the time I’d be talking to people about the film and, almost as an aside they’d say to me “I have to say, he’s very sexy.” You know, if it was George Clooney, they wouldn’t be whispering that to me, they’d just come out and say it. It is almost taboo [. . .] The budget was $500,000, and yeah, this being my first film did certainly make it harder to raise. Whenever you write an independent film that doesn’t read like a sellable Hollywood script, people get a bit nervous, and if it’s from a first time writer/director then people get nervous, and when you’ve got a dwarf in the lead role people get nervous. You put that combination together, and it doesn’t add up to fast cash. (“Size Really Doesn’t Matter”)  

McCarthy’s candid comments expose ableist ideology at work in the movie industry on micro and macro scales – encompassing physicality, appearance and performativity – and perhaps most importantly, its power brokers’ discursive perception of disability onscreen. The “whisper” around Dinklage’s sexiness nearly ten years ago has shifted in part to the cover of tabloids and interviews on MTV about “fantastic” women. As an example of a charismatic, disabled actor, are there no non-disabled characters available for Dinklage to play? Say, one who is six feet tall? This double standard reveals a significant sociotextual inequity insofar as how the “representational possible” of disability onscreen keeps the cultural imaginary (along with its funders, employees and star power) safe and able. While studios (as directed by advertisers and panopticon-type audience review responses [Chivers, Markotić 3]) undoubtedly make decisions on a typecast basis, McCarthy’s insistence upon Dinklage’s leading role renders those mechanisms ineffective – or just enough to accommodate another pretty face and solid performance.

While certainly not surprising, McCarthy’s mentioning of actors of colour being spoken for in an air of assumptive cultural and commercial appetites shares contemporary tensions and similar struggles to disability. As Hollywood shapes onscreen bodily idealism via race, sexuality, gender or ability, whether as a “low” mass cultural form or as “cult” films with communities (which Browning’s Freaks and The Station Agent both enjoy), criticism of that idealism follows. Given cinema’s roots as a _

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86 Not surprisingly, an article in a recent edition of The Daily Mail features his heteronormative family image below a title declaring, “He’s not like his character! Game of Thrones star Peter Dinklage is quite the family man on stroll with wife and baby” (Larkin).

87 The production of Snow White and The Huntsmen (2012) caused economic and representational controversy in the disabled acting community. Instead of hiring dwarves to play dwarves, Universal studios used CG to make typically-sized, better-known actors appear diminutive.
medium for the masses, its objectification and narrative erasure of disability reflects insidious ways in which modernity’s eugenics project reinforces itself wherever possible. Thought of as a “completion of modernity as a cultural project” (Snyder and Mitchell 31), well-funded endorsements of disability’s demise reinvigorate Althusser’s coining of the term “problematic.” His “communications ISA” (54), too, certainly has room for a cinematic ISA where the old “state” becomes a contemporary lived experience of mutual socioeconomic desires and achievements perpetually normalizing (often monetizing) onscreen subjects by movie’s end to ensure aesthetics of social calm, joy or relief for audiences. What is attainable in a dominant cultural imaginary, at least, retains surprising limits around what those “dreams” should sell and project. McCarthy’s discussion also exposes multivalent layers of nervousness—financial, personal and symbolic—around the production and reception of films featuring disability. Quayson’s idea of aesthetic nervousness through disruption of “dominant protocols of representation within [a filmic] text” (15) might also consider how disability ensures dominant protocols of representation. McCarthy’s recollections reveal the film industry’s ideological nervousness based solely on disability’s potential representation onscreen.

How McCarthy tells his story of attaining his relatively tiny budget via rhetorical leveraging of one minority (African Americans) with/upon the larger less “visible” but often more “noticeable” minority of disability invites new ways to explore why, exactly, such tension exists in the first place. Building off social, cultural, financial unease here to privilege the roles and (collective) ethos of a normative social body negates the real ways in which audiences shape what “we” consume on screen. Such a process also illustrates double standards of identity at play in what constitutes “popular” culture and how dominant culture appropriates and profits from otherness while sustaining and maintaining its normative borders. Though an older concept in disability studies, Garland-Thomson’s idea of the “normate” reaffirms my above observations about very real biopolitical bodily limits onscreen and their effect upon our cultural imaginary. In her 2009 text, *Staring: How We Look*, Garland-Thomson revisits the concept in terms of differences in the visual field. She describes the “normate” as “the veiled subject position of the cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked

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88 As a film that features disability (specifically, hereditary blindness) in troubling ways, Lars von Trier’s *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), presents a comparatively rare narrative outcome that doesn’t reward its disabled protagonist/mother, Selma (Björk) for her perilous, ultimately successful, efforts in getting a sight-saving operation for her son. Instead, she is executed. The resultant theater experience for many was aesthetically and emotionally unsettling.
bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries.” She continues, suggesting “Actual normates are as scarce as hen’s teeth, whereas imagined normates preside over the public landscape” (45). In addition to the cultural significance of representation, Garland-Thomson’s observations also indicate how this imaginary concept interpolates and “polices” the visual field at large and our behaviours within that field, oddly in defense of physically scarce “normate” ontology.

If race was an issue forty years ago (and still is – in terms of a disproportionate lack of black “leading” actors, for example), disability remains an issue. While derogatory acts and/or comments around race, gender and sexuality are not (largely) condoned in public, the comparatively acceptable litanies of “short” jokes and stereotypical characterizations of dwarfs shore up safe, normative boundaries – while negatively (and at times, physically) marking disability – in private and public spaces. As Dinklage recalls in an older interview, apparently such behaviour is entirely acceptable. He notes, “‘Somebody touched me on the subway once [. . .] and when I turned around, this old woman said, ‘Sorry, I just need good luck today’. And I’m not confrontational, but I got a little pissed off at that’” (Rubin, “Peter Dinklage Walks into a Bar. . .”). Much more than the charm of a breakfast cereal, the “old woman[‘s]” actions keep disability (and Dinklage’s experience) within a romanticized, stereotypical one-dimensionality – as ability defining, and speaking for disability, or to expand upon Garland-Thompson’s idea, a very real “imagin[ary] normat[e] presid[ing] over the public landscape” (45).

As Dinklage’s “charming” subway experience confirms, different physicalities conceive and use space differently. If a normative (real and imaginary) process of spatial, sociocultural othering maintains stereotypical representations of disability and their repercussions in film, it certainly does not exist in a vacuous passive act of viewer absorption or as a romanticized, “impressed upon” sense of experience. Rather, viewers as test audiences on behalf of film studios and their investors searching for palatable characterizations have “real” stakes in the uptake and outcomes of “fictional” films. Chivers and Markotić posit a “unique and contradictory” position for viewers of film as Foucauldian “panopticon voyeurs,” more dimensional than Laura Mulvey’s idea of the (usually male) voyeur embodied in the film’s audience, and for whom the film is often

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89 They note that Disney’s *Mulan* was deliberately crafted and tested to ensure positive outcomes according to Chinese folklore and (government-sanctioned) culture as a means to increase global market share regardless of whether the film would be shown to Chinese audiences. Conversely, *Pocahontas*, they note, shows no such “cultural sensitivity” and resulted in several protests about “whitewashing” and desensitizing the story (3).
“framed”; Chivers and Markotić suggest a “panopticon relies on its dwellers’ awareness of being observed [and that] few critics speak to the normalizing power of projected viewing audiences. Unlike the notion of [Wolfgang Iser’s] ‘ideal reader’, the panopticon voyeurs of film shape and establish subject matter” (3). Watching a film in a controlled, observed space, then, becomes a sort of oppressive act on/in several registers. In a double-assertion of bodily policing, normates observe how other normates experience the film to shape a desired response or narrative. This shift marks an important way to think through representations and writerly “treatments” (to share a medicalized and filmic term) of disability as inseparable from its experiences. Chivers and Markotić continue: “the representation of disability does not exist separate from disability itself [. . .] disabled or not – when “we” watch a film, we all participate in disability discourse” (4). This inclusivity, whether “we” like it or not, insists upon disability’s inseparability from its discussion and offers theoretical allegiances to our cultural materials and our actions. The “it’s just a movie” argument becomes irrelevant when admitting the attraction of bodily difference, desire, spectacle and the stuff we are told not to stare at as children – ableist subject or not. Chivers and Markotić rightly point out that “the gaze” that so often pinpoints filmic others brings with it a “mis-assumed relationship between looking and knowing [that is] particularly salient to film reception” (4). Conversely, the informed gaze of a physician, for example, carries knowledge through practice and experience. The climactic scene near the close of The Station Agent (which I will revisit) – as Fin drunkenly climbs atop the town bar to tell all to, “Take a look!,” with arms outstretched above a room full of surprised patrons – exposes the myth of looking as knowing. Demanding the attention and “looks” of viewers onscreen (and in the audience) reveals an inability for many to “know” or relate to the experiences of a drunken four-foot five-inch man.

Shifting perception in this way admits and encourages very obvious participation in non-voyeuristic ways of looking. Returning to Davidson’s multivalent concept of “social panic”90 to situate market-friendly underpinnings around representations of disability on film and “treatment” of disability in social, political and economic spheres becomes more significant given our contemporary cycle of perpetual economic crises. “Social panic,” then, entwines unnecessarily with the negatively framed instability of a collective “normative” social body and ideas of ablenationalism. Pulling back to a modernist

90 Stanley Cohen’s earlier notion of “moral panic” occurs in part with the empowerment of “folk devils” who threaten established hierarchies.
framework, briefly, disability appears as artistic material within and as constitutive of an avant-garde (whether a literally wounded front-line soldier or as a recurring trope and agitator against a range of mythical “established” unities\(^{91}\) that up to and including now take on and reflect cultural anxieties and impossibilities. Thankfully, disabled experience beyond fictional narratives proves otherwise.

**Spots Only on Some of Us in Film**

“This is a business of projection and desiring people from afar . . . so there has got to be *some* truth to it, in terms of, ‘I could see myself with that person’.” (Jane Lynch)

“I can’t be like this, Frankie.” (“Maggie” from *Million Dollar Baby*)

Speaking to the controversy within disability communities\(^{92}\) around *Million Dollar Baby*’s narrative “treatment” of its eventually quadriplegic protagonist, Maggie, Fisher and Shapshay note, “The imagery that director Clint Eastwood uses conveys a specific message that links disability with death” (230). Played to critical and financial acclaim by Hillary Swank, replete with breathing tube (its sounds very prevalent in the film’s mix), Maggie’s dry voice behind excessively chapped lips generates enough pathos to allow her request to have Frankie end her life seem plausible – as though emotionally and narratively necessary. Frankie’s eventual capitulation as he sneaks into her room and administers a lethal shot of adrenalin concretizes the film’s “better off dead” (Mairs) argument and outcome. After all, how can Maggie “be like this” if the story provides her few other plausible options? Numerous disability scholars (McRuer, Markotić, Davis, Davidson, Dolmage and others) comment upon how Maggie’s ontological shift does/should not negate her ability to learn, teach and/or share her considerable experiences beyond a hospital bed. Though she does refuse Frankie’s quick offer of a motorized chair and attending school, even as a strong female character of limited income who succeeds within an overtly patriarchal, misogynistic and violent sport, if

\(^{91}\) Thinking through the theory and cultural material of disability from modernism to now, if modernism brings unity and alienation, postmodernism a sense of fragmentation and formations of otherness, then disability brings a sense of post-post modernism insofar as the “disabled other” often involves indefinable possibilities and considerations.

\(^{92}\) For useful context consult, Dolmage and DeGenaro’s “‘I Cannot Be Like This Frankie’: Disability, Social Class, and Gender in *Million Dollar Baby*” (*DSQ* 25.2 [Spring 2005]).
onscreen disability resolves itself in her death and makes hundreds of millions of dollars in the process.\textsuperscript{93} then, true to neoliberal, biopolitical ends, why not?

Part of my concern and interest here resides in how ahistorical, apolitical mass uptakes of films can reaffirm performances of disability that “largely uninformed audience[s] fin[d] convincing” (Chivers, Markotić 1) while usually avoiding disability (on its own terms) and dignity in the process. Doing so devalues those of us who identify as disabled. Thinking through my notion of the representational possible provides a means to bridge sociotextual inequities in film and ways to consider experiences within and beyond them. As an example, Tobin Siebers likens ablebodied actors who play disabled characters as performers in drag, suggesting,

we have the same experience of exaggeration and performance as when we view a man playing a woman. Audiences, however, rarely recognize the symmetry. Dustin Hoffman does not pass as a woman in \textit{Tootsie} (1982). Nor does he pass as disabled in \textit{Rain Man} (1988). Audiences nevertheless have entirely different reactions to the two performances—they know the first one is a fake but accept the second one as Oscar worthy. (115)

While Siebers’ analogy is not entirely convincing, his notion of “disability drag” (116) (that Hoffman fulfills) is compelling for a couple of reasons. First, the idea gives us ways to consider, and separate, disability and its representation. Second, Siebers’s comparison suggests that both types of acting are usually – to use a well-worn camp expression – “over the top.” That Hoffman \textit{nearly} won an Oscar for \textit{Tootsie} implies that “fake” performances are almost equally accepted and rewarded. I believe the tensions behind such masks of performance – in addition to having an ablebodied, straight actor teach us about female empowerment or heaping praise upon actors in accordance with performing greater degrees of disability.\textsuperscript{94}—involve sociocultural values around false

\textsuperscript{93} At the recent U.S Republican National Convention in Florida, Clint Eastwood’s now-infamous speech, which, in addition to featuring one-sided dialogue with an empty chair, also confirms his views of capital and property by repeating the phrase “we own this country!” To reconsider \textit{Million Dollar Baby} alongside its director’s politics while the camera pans across a chanting audience suggests, troublingly, that his “we” is predominately male, white and able. In \textit{Concerto for the Left Hand}, Davidson reveals Eastwood’s views of disability and the Americans with Disabilities Act as possible motivation for Maggie’s demise. After being successfully sued by a disabled patron at his hotel for issues of accessibility, Eastwood lobbied for changes to the ADA, calling it “a form of extortion” (233).

\textsuperscript{94} This phenomenon occurs even in rare moments when disabled actors play disabled characters. J.P. Mitte, an actor with mild cerebral palsy who plays “Walter White Jr.” (son of “Walter White,” [Brian Cranston] chemistry teacher/meth dealer) in the TV series \textit{Breaking Bad}, a character with more significant CP. Conversely, disability does not feature prominently for Robert David Hall, a double leg amputee in his role as “Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Albert Robbins” on \textit{CSI: Crime Scene Investigation}. 

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ideas of authenticity in entertainment. When the movie is over and Hoffman’s autism disappears (in time for his next film, perhaps), his renewal as able marks a temporary designation for disability in the cultural imaginary — when the opposite is largely true, if we live long enough.

Colin Firth’s hyper-acclaimed performance in *The King’s Speech* as a stuttering George VI,⁹⁵ who overcomes and normalizes his experiences for audiences just in time for a speech to mobilize his nation to war leaves viewers to consider no other way for him to speak. This framing also marks those who do stutter as somehow less capable to lead — or represent — even perilous biopolitical national interests and identities. While Firth’s compelling performance as a stutterer invokes a more dimensional experience of disability than Swank’s, these films (and many others) affirm film/TV actress Jane Lynch’s apt take of her medium’s limits and further equate non-normative sexuality and disability on screen: if we cannot “see” ourselves with (or as) someone, then, such a “business of projection” (qtd. in Ciminelli), is apparently the only cultural imaginary worth our consideration and verification.

Conversely, while a pseudo-anthropological “just visiting” approach to disability onscreen in major film releases is alive and usually well rewarded, it is crucial to consider moments when this approach fails. In consideration of equitable, dignified roles for disability onscreen and off, negotiating sociotextual inequity here also involves larger cultural and biopolitical trepidation around disability. What connections might exist between Gary Oldman’s critically panned, literally-on-his-knees depiction of a dwarf (Rolfe) in the straight-to-DVD film *Tiptoes* (2003) and societal prejudices against dwarfs and those who are unable to work (like Henderson), presumably because of such stereotypical portrayals?

Keeping in mind that films, like much in the cultural industry, are many while critical and/or monetary “successes” are few, *Tiptoes* (directed by Matthew Bright) joins this chapter’s brief list of movies that feature disability and economic or material difficulties around their production. Rolfe’s role as sage-like “twin” brother to a full-sized Stephen (played by Matthew McConaughey) becomes more significant as his girlfriend, Carol (played by Kate Beckinsale) reveals that she is pregnant. After Stephen reveals to Carol that he is the only non-dwarf in his family, the bride-to-be worries (of course) about

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⁹⁵ Apparently, Firth “gained an insight into what [stuttering] feels like” due to its “quite infectious” nature (Ward). The actual George VI, *speaking* in Scotland, illustrates that his “impediment” was never erased.
their future child. Before heading back to the family cabin “to write for the winter,” Rolfe receives a full kiss on the lips from the burgeoning bride on her big day. “You are really special to me,” she says to Rolfe, before she departs – apparently well prepared to handle the demands of heterosexual normalcy and the uncertain ontology of her future child. To be fair, Dinklage, who plays a supporting role in the film claims the original director’s cut was much better. The company that took over financing of the film, however, fired Bright after the screening and “ruined the movie.”

Like The Station Agent, it is difficult to ascertain what exactly happened with funding, but it may be fair to imply here that disability as subject matter generates socioeconomic panic around casting actors with disabilities in particular ways and vice versa – even while paving roads to Oscar’s gold. In a recent interview with Patt Morrison, Danny Woodburn – representing the disabled actors’ organization, I AM PWD (persons with disabilities), and probably most recognizable as “Mickey Abbott” on Seinfeld – acknowledges the real comparative lack of disabled actors onscreen. He advocates for more balanced representation, noting the inequities of “having a community of disabled [people] that is about twenty percent of the population [while] less than one percent of disabled actors appear on TV [and] many [disabled characters] are not portrayed by disabled actors” (“Little People Speak Out”). While few socioeconomic analyses of box office, distribution and audience demographics are available for a film like Tiptoes, Woodburn’s statistic suggests that disability via disabled actors does not actually sell onscreen, while performances of disability do.

Rolfe’s role in “educating” Carol on what it is like to be a dwarf during the course of the film unravels a significant thread that ties stereotypical representations of disability (played by an able-bodied actor significantly more often than not) together in a range of narrative scenarios to help able-bodied characters and (if we reconsider Henderson’s portrayal/treatment in the media) audiences feel better about themselves. While on the surface at least, there exists a sense of satisfaction – so seldom sexual – to the disabled, enlightened “enabler,” so to speak, the interest is not on his or her own terms.

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86 Dinklage describes Tiptoes as “a lovely mess of a movie [and that] while [he was] making it [he] saw the director’s cut, and it was gorgeous.” He continues, “The people who fired [Bright] ruined the movie [and] made it into a weird little quirky rom-com, but with dwarves [which] was what we were fighting against – the cuteness of little people” (Kois).

87 Similarly, Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts advocates “full diversity as a key to the vitality and dynamism of American theatre, film, and television” (inclusioninthearts.org).
Along with the work of Martin Norden, the late Paul Longmore’s pivotal article, “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People” (1985, later revised), outlines several clichéd yet perpetually prevalent “roles” for disability in film. Of the above kind of narrative/filmic scenario Longmore notes,

> In fictional productions, nondisabled persons usually treat disabled people badly, not because of bias, but out of insensitivity and lack of understanding. It becomes the responsibility of the disabled individual to “educate” them, to allay their anxieties and make them feel comfortable. (9-10)

By this logic, the stigmatized person does all the work in eliminating the stigma – or at least alleviates it for the narrative at hand and for wider consumption (though not so much with *Tiptoes*). The close of Longmore’s essay, considering the enduring panic of our socioeconomic climate, provides useful, contemporary theoretical context:

> The scholarly task is to uncover the hidden history of disabled people and to raise to awareness the unconscious attitudes and values embedded in [problematic] media images. The political task is to liberate disabled people from the paternalistic prejudice expressed in those images and to forge a new social identity. The two are inseparable. (16)

As my discussion shows, those “unconscious attitudes and values” are very aware and working hard to value disability most when it asserts normative desires rather than on its own experiential terms. In what ways can film continue liberation and make new? My disagreement with Kumari-Campbell’s idea of disability as embodying “ontologically peripheral lives” (4, 131) is in part because such a view reinforces ableist perceptions of disability as though disability is not available for consumption in the first place. Again, disability is everywhere; but because of its less than desirable, often-charitable status, it rarely appears as profitable subject matter unless normalized, overcome or erased. Disability as marginal defies its cultural prevalence – even as that emergent role is problematic and inequitable for many. While mainstream cinema and popular culture perpetually frustrate the necessity of forging a new or continual, historical and legible social and cultural identity for disability – by vaulting supercrips or privileging actors with pretty faces – it exists as a significant means of framing and selling interesting narratives. If disability’s representational exploitation contributes to its sociopolitical oppression, the work of theory, activism (like I AM PWD), and its allies,

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99 The success of the documentary *Murderball* (2005) featuring the rivalry between the Canadian and American national wheelchair rugby teams offers a counter example.
along with the occasional studio executive who “values” disability beyond capital, will broaden our cultural imaginary and bridge inequities of experience and access.

Given such biopolitically significant subject matter, the narrative elimination of socially valuable choices for disability (and for characters of different abilities) shapes representational possibilities in film – a sort of normalizing “codebook” (Dinklage) according to genre. What “conventional” possibilities exist for the representation of disability on screen? With his roles in Game of Thrones and The Station Agent, Dinklage challenges the narrow range of available, stereotypical roles. At the same time, however, his characters also contribute to a hetero-masculinist discourse of sexuality and ability. Browning’s Freaks helped to shape and test these limits seventy years earlier – for better and for worse.

Do Dinklage’s recent successes with a role more commercially palatable (along with its overt heteromasculinity) mark representational and/or sociocultural progress for disability? Speaking to his role in Game of Thrones as non-stereotypical, Dinklage states:

I think it’s more reality-based [rather] than fantasy, personally, and maybe I’m a little bit biased, ’cause I sometimes see, ah, people of my size, how they are represented in fantasies. They’re comical and I feel like there is some sort of codebook that you have to follow with fantasy, with our show that line is very unclear. (“Making of”)

Longmore’s desire to unhinge those historically informed/enforced “unconscious values” around disability onscreen are indirectly revealed by Dinklage’s hints of aesthetic unease around “some sort of codebook that [he] ha[s] to follow.” When speaking to a presumably smaller audience that does not encompass an imaginary, mythical pacifism of HBO’s viewership, for example, with less financial clout and not edited for short-attention-television-bursts – a different audience within a different “codebook,” so to speak – Dinklage is much more explicit about the implications and inseparability of his representations, experiences and performances. Speaking to The Playbill he reveals:

I try not to read too much into it, but there’s a bit of a bias, where you’re thought of as a mystical creature, which is a bit absurd [.I] have a great sense of humor – and a dark sense of humor – about everything, but it is a bit narrow-minded sometimes, where if they have a dwarf character, the shoes have to curl up at the end, he has this inherent wisdom, he isn’t sexual, all of that. You look at something like Snow White, and each of the dwarves is just one thing – this one sneezes, this one is angry, this one is tired. And that’s sometimes still true for modern-day stories. But [typecasting is] not just for dwarves. It could be the case for anybody, for women [and] for people of color. Right now[.] Middle Eastern
people all playing terrorists. It’s short-sighted. But life is too short – no pun intended – to be interested in roles that haven’t got any meat. (qtd. in Vineyard)

To seek substance without being typecast seems a reasonable, equitable option for any actor to pursue; the idea also belies Dinklage’s earlier desire to play the leading man and get the girl – if only because our cultural imaginary is framed by very real socioeconomic, biopolitical impulses that shape the “representational possible” as a means to affirm sociotextual inequities for typecast actors like Dinklage, Henderson, or the next prime-time “terrorist.” A “healthy” sociocultural, economic or political body able to overcome and/or “learn from” adversity in itself is most often located in “other” bodies, or characters that seldom mirror the audience they (and their directors) hope to inform. After all, they are just doing their jobs, right? Returning to the ideas of disability as performative, what if disabled actors’ regular jobs included playing non-disabled characters? While such a “radical” practice must address the significant lack of disabled roles for disabled actors, considering Woodburn’s “less than one percent” statistic and the use of CG in shaping embodiments onscreen, why not?

I am mindful of film studies as a cultural field amid surprising concerns that some disability theorists might miss films’ artistic capacities, techniques and terminologies in favour of “taking an advocacy, activist perspective when critiquing disability cinema” (Hoekesma and Smit 35). I also believe – in addition to engaging with representation as form – that the “job” of disability theory (in our contemporary climate of fewer jobs) when applied to film is, as Longmore suggests, to “liberate disabled people from [. . .] prejudice[d] images and to forge a new social identity” (16). If so, Browning’s Freaks proves equally significant and problematic on both fronts. In addition to reframing physical spaces (such as living spaces that accommodate the stature of their inhabitants) and behaviours (like sideshow performers carrying out domestic chores) to invert ideas of “normal” and “freak,” the film also occupies an unlikely historic role in reassigning oppressive language by prominently featuring those marked by it. The film’s

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100 The episode “Checkpoint Gnarly” from the comedy series Workaholics features disabled actor Edward Barbanell as “Bradley/B-Rad.” Though his Down’s Syndrome is apparent to the viewing audience, his non-stereotypical humor and confidence make his “disability” irrelevant to the story. I’ve included the link to his performance here (Barbanell’s scenes begin at 1:50 – viewer discretion is advised).

101 In the same interview, Woodburn reveals the story of his friend, ablebodied actor, Pat Finn, who was asked to audition to play a character who uses a wheelchair. Woodburn recalls Finn’s surprise in noticing that not one of the actors trying out for the part actually used a wheelchair. Finn subsequently got the role and turned it down. In doing so he “forced the studio’s hand” and wheelchair-using actors also read for the part (“Little People Speak Out”).
cultural longevity, I believe, is partly due to its unifying of disability through language and its resonance with oppressed social movements/groups, which results in (most fittingly here) its at times uneasy presence in contemporary theoretical and multidisciplinary discussions\textsuperscript{102} around the body, spectacle, normalcy, sexuality, culture and economics. As a means of revaluing representations and receptions of disability onscreen, \textit{Freaks} also shares a history of heteronormative sexual tensions with \textit{The Station Agent} insofar as both films feature a diminutive male character desiring a typically-sized female character.

Images of diminutive male actors and their “normal sized” female characters of affection in a range of films reflect unease with their material: in the confusing promotional material for \textit{Tiptoes} – with the title’s lower-case “i” signifying a little person and Gary Oldman/Rolle gazing up at a comparatively giant Kate Beckinsale/Carol – apparently the “little things” do not “matter” (on the poster at least). The imagery on the \textit{Freaks} poster implies the tagline for Browning’s film, “CAN A FULL GROWN WOMAN TRULY LOVE A MIDGET?,” will never come to fruition given Hercules’s normative policing. In an act of false advertising, the “cartoon safety” of Hans and (an also giant) Cleo’s revealing clinch suggests a scene that Browning’s film never delivers. Comparatively, Fin and Emily’s kiss in \textit{The Station Agent} is as explicit as the film gets (images [l to r] from \textit{Cracked.com}, \textit{IMP Awards} and \textit{The Station Agent}).

As a means of tying the two films together in this way, I visit a brief exchange between a friendlier Fin with Joe while they drink beers and smoke cigarettes atop Fin’s abandoned train car. Joe reveals his (and presumably the audience’s) curiosity about Fin’s sexual history and preference in a tightly framed conversation.

\begin{verbatim}
JOE: Can I ask you a personal question?
FIN: Sure.
JOE: You’ve had sex, right?
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{102} A recent call for papers in the \textit{Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies} focuses upon “Disability and the American Counterculture,” suggesting: “The American Counterculture has a complex relationship with disability. At its heart is the reinvention of the term \textit{freak} that serves as an early example of empowering, though not unproblematic, appropriation of what had previously been a derogatory term” (personal e-mail).
FIN: Yes.
JOE: With a regular-sized chick?
FIN: Yeah. With a regular-sized chick.
JOE: You ever had it with someone your own size?
FIN: No.
JOE: Do you wanna?
FIN: I don’t want to talk about this, Joe –
JOE: Why?
FIN: I just . . . I just don’t.

That the next scene features a dimly lit Olivia in a voyeuristic long shot swallowing a small handful of pills en-route to a near fatal overdose builds tensions. Her way of normalizing or coping with the loss of her child, a failed marriage and finding out that her ex is having a child with someone else juxtaposed with Fin’s muted sexual desires generates communicative unease in the film. What begins as a relatively innocent and humorously received line of questioning turns potentially dire in just over thirty seconds of screen time. Fin and Joe’s dialogue also serves the narrative purpose of setting up Fin’s future off-screen relationship with local librarian, Emily. The next day he receives mail with his address on it from his noticeably lowered, more accessible mailbox – allowing him to get a library card and garner her flirtatious “You have a nice chin” remark. When Fin shares this information, Joe considers the compliment as “fucking weird.” Joe’s lighthearted yet crass response mediates sexual possibilities, just as his curiosity about Fin’s sexuality via a spectacle-seeking line of questioning makes normative assumptions of/for an audience. Commenting upon someone’s chin, arguably, is not that weird. Framing it as so, however, helps justify Fin’s not wanting to have sex with someone his own size (whether he does, or not) along with his refusal to talk about it (or not) with Joe. Such mediation also exposes double standards (usually appearing in language or jokes, as mentioned earlier) that make ableist inquiries of disability and sex more permissible than ones around sex and race and/or sexuality in general.

Maintaining audience interest in a character of diminutive stature having sex “with a regular-sized chick” becomes an exercise both in constructing desire and in locating its history. Why might we believe a sexual relationship between a “little person” and “normal sized person” is an impossibility – or at least in its representational possible onscreen? If ableism implies Fin might only desire a woman of similar stature, then *Freaks’* sensational branding and subsequent addition of a eugenicist prologue helps

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103 The scrolling “special message” that appears before the original film was added in the 1940s by filmmaker/distributor Dwain Esper. In two-and-a-half minutes it shares ableist perceptions of
shape such “exclusive” ideology for audiences. Early promotion of the film (note movie poster image[s] above) asks, “Can a full grown woman truly love a midget?” A later review of the film claims, “for pure sensationalism Freaks tops any picture yet produced. It’s more fantastic and grotesque than any shocker ever written” (Parsons, qtd. in Hawkins 266). Certainly controversial, the movie was removed from theatres six months after its release in part due to pressure from groups seeking to preserve onscreen morality.

Though apparently Freaks sent one woman “screaming down the aisle” (Skal), Browning’s storyline is relatively banal, but significant for how it features disability. Apart from its hype, the film’s narrative (an already engaged man lusting after another woman while she feigns interest because of his wealth, only to attempt his murder after their hasty marriage, culminating in the subsequent revenge of the man and his friends when her evil plot is foiled) is, as little person actor Mark Povinelli aptly notes, “basically a soap opera set in a sideshow” (“Commentary”). While a familiar genre, Freaks’ range of bodies, including dwarfs, a human torso, conjoined twins, and a man without legs who propels himself with his hands, also depends upon an audience’s allegiance with or rejection of them to generate tension. Browning’s love/revenge plot follows dramatic conventions more so than horrific, yet the film is classified as horror. Is such a designation partly due to Browning’s casting of a midget (Harry Earles as “Hans”) and a “normal-sized” woman (Olga Baclanova as “Cleopatra,” the trapeze artist) and the “horrific” as the object of his sexual desire?

Such cultural assumptions contribute to and maintain a lengthy history of films that normalize disability through heteronormative sexuality. As Kim notes,

By taking for granted men’s desire for women of a certain size and shape, the film attempts to overcome disability, and through this effort it lends to Hans’ status as a “real” man. More importantly, it visualizes the assumption that, because of their presumed undesirability, disabled people are doomed to be inadequately gendered unless they receive sexual enabling. (132-3)

Put more generally, though dismissively, Davidson asks “What is Tod Browning’s Freaks if not a film that exploits ‘extraordinary’ bodies by imagining them as sexual?” (77).
Exactly how Browning imagines the film’s unique embodiments, along with how they operate in our larger cultural imaginary, certainly lends significance to Fin’s refusal to answer Joe’s question. Both Kim and Davidson do share exploitive readings of the same film; however, Kim’s observations challenge biopolitical, ideological limitations upon and expectations of some of *Freaks*’ disabled characters.

The wealthy suitor, Hans’, comparatively obsessive aspirations to love femme fatale Olga, the “most beautiful woman [he has] ever seen,” fail because of his near-death from her poisoning of him during their wedding feast. As a result, his fellow performers band together, vengefully, to render the once “peacock of the air” into a mutilated, surreal “chicken lady” in a box. After all of Hans’ transgressions, though, he is perhaps too conveniently forgiven by his former fiancée, Frieda (played by his real-life sister, Daisy Earles), and “reimagined” or reunified, literally, and non-threateningly via their wedding plans at the end of the film. Aligning sex and disability in this way avoids panic around ideas of healthy, able social and biologically productive bodies and limits sexual imagination/imaginary to similar embodiments. The film does, however, share the results of heteronormative reproduction between the “Bearded Lady” (image above) and “The Human Skeleton” (Peter Robinson). Along with the continual support of the dolphin trainer, Venus (Leila Hyams) and Phroso the Clown (Wallace Ford), Phroso’s misdirected humour upon the arrival of the newborn girl (which viewers do not see) – “Oh boy! That’s great and it’s going to have a beard!” – attempts to “humanize,” normalize and unify the freaks’ community through biopolitical means.

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104 She was also known as “the midget Mae West” (“Commentary”).
Browning’s at times innovative representations of disability\(^{105}\) (and of normalcy) disrupt notions of able-bodied stability and control over the disabled “other” by eventually presenting the disabled characters as a vengeful spectacle, but also as capable sexually and socially autonomous. Importantly, *Freaks* provides significant economic opportunities for its cast, but it also creates considerable sociotextual inequity. In addition to limiting the narrative (and imaginary) options for a non-typical body to have a sexual or relationship with a typical body as a form of social capital, economic benefits for the film’s real sideshow performers are also “normalized.” For example, former Ringling Brothers’ ablebodied, full-sized artist and performer Johnny Meah (in spoken-for third person perspective) makes the process for and production of the film and its subjects appear benevolent, suggesting,

> they found a way to make a living that they probably thought they would never be able to do because of their deformities and were placed in an environment of acceptance from other people that had physical problems. They could hold their head up because they could wind up buying a house and all the things that everyone wanted as normal people so it was a great equalizer. (“Commentary”)

By linking property ownership to pride or value in oneself, Meah’s observations bring together socioeconomic and cultural work as a means to bridge inequalities for *Freaks*’ sideshow actors. Even so, several participants expressed regret over their problematic representations in the film (Cook 48). Jerry Maren\(^{106}\) notes that Browning’s characterizations of disabled actors “put us in a bad light” (“Commentary”). So, it is difficult to qualify and value the opportunity in at times embodying, establishing and maintaining stereotypes. Do economic valuations insist upon social devaluations? And, what exactly “equalizes” when exploiting stereotypes of disability? Again, to avoid panic around the film industry and perhaps his livelihood, *Freaks* and sideshow historian Todd Robbins claims: “life is too difficult to force someone to perform”\(^{107}\); yet he goes on to say that the entertainment industry is “all about exploitation and selling to the public that which makes you different.” Apparently such “logic” reaffirms itself in late capitalist and bodily ideology in our desires for what “normal people” have; ironically, however, that

\(^{105}\) There are several scenes where disabled characters embody “everyday” behaviour such as Frieda hanging up her laundry, a character with no arms (Frances O’Connor) using a fork and knife with her feet, Randian the Living Torso lighting and smoking a cigarette and one of the conjoined twins, Daisy, getting married.

\(^{106}\) Acting for over 70 years, he first role was as a “munchkin” in the “Lollipop Guild” in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) (IMDB).

\(^{107}\) Recalling an anecdote from my time at music school, currently-jailed record producer Phil Spector apparently had a loaded gun with him during recording sessions – at times brandishing it for “motivational purposes.”
which makes many of us “different” beyond the screen and in public spaces leaves few options to attain those desires.

If so, then how might economic tensions combine with dominant filmic and public space to actually make disabled experience and its representations more equal? Thinking through Henderson’s public assault alongside Browning’s framing of normal sized characters as awkward and diminutive characters as comfortable in their environments illustrates that if representations, such as those produced on a film set, can accommodate physical difference\(^\text{108}\) then surely our social behaviours can move beyond curiosity or spectacle. When Frieda confronts Hans about her concerns over his seemingly inexplicable drive to be with Cleopatra, Browning’s careful attention to set design and camera angles, allows their conversation the seriousness it deserves. Hans’ domestically appointed carnival-sized trailer encourages a re-evaluation of spatial normalcy by avoiding an environment that “construct[s] cultural estrangement from [their own] perspectives” and instead creates a very “[h]abitable universe” (Mitchell, Snyder 175). Their surroundings are not disruptive, nor a reminder of a normal-sized environment. If these characters were speaking amongst giant, imposing furniture, the subsequent effectiveness would be comical. They also exhibit clichéd behaviour in terms of gender stereotypes – a passive, compassionate female and an aggressive and deterministic male who provides stock responses to an emotionally discarded female character. Standing at the doorway in dramatic fashion, Hans seems oblivious to Frieda’s calm caveats about his desire to wed Cleopatra. Frieda also reveals what the audience has known since Hans began his pursuit of the belligerent Cleopatra:

FRIEDA: To me you’re a man, but to her you’re only something to laugh at. The whole circus . . . they make fun by you and her.
HANS: Let them laugh! They’re swine! I love her, they can’t hurt me!
FRIEDA: But they hurt me.

While the repetition of “hurt” in their dialogue builds sympathy for Frieda, the external context of these characters as entertaining circus performers also negates the potential of disability as a site of laughter. Tensions between body and perspective also exist. To Frieda, Hans is a man, yet, to Cleopatra, Hans is an object of derision – and an easy mark. However removed from Joe’s “You’re the man” sexual imperative/encouragement

\(^\text{108}\) Conversely, the “bed scene” from Werner Herzog’s \textit{Auch Zwerge Haben Klein Angefangen} (Even Dwarves Started Small) (1970) illustrates both problems of access (for the male character at least) and the relative absurdity of normal-sized furniture. In the film, inmates of an institution take over their space often in opposition to normal-sized objects around them.
for Fin, each exchange reinforces an ideology of (as Kim might concur) masculine sexuality as an indispensable motivator of narratives of disability in film.

“They” are the same characters who laugh as Hans gives Cleopatra a back rub, and Frieda’s pronoun obviously includes Hercules and Cleopatra, the two “masterminds” behind the failed poison plot. Méira Cook suggests: “One of the ways Browning more successfully troubles the boundaries between normative and freakish is through his systematic monstering – for want of a better word – of the so-called normal characters in the movie” (50). Cleopatra and Hercules, hunched and contorted as they attempt to manoeuvre within a similar-sized trailer, serve spatial reference to the idea that able-bodied normalcy is not available in all environments. While Hans’s trailer accommodates the protagonists of the film, Hercules’ and Cleopatra’s awkward portrayal helps affirm their behaviour as disruptive to the sideshow community and reflects the film’s reluctance to accommodate their dishonest motivations in attaining Hans’ wealth, or, as Hercules puts it, “the little pollywog[s] money.”

Tom McCarthy’s The Station Agent also resonates with Freaks in terms of how it frames and challenges – in a more humorous fashion – dominant portrayals of disability in film. As mentioned, the film’s beginning offers Fin’s perspectives of being stared at. If, as Garland-Thomson suggests, “story structures staring” (167), then The Station Agent does well to expose the motivations and stereotypical social behaviours of the starer rather than the “staree” (3). For much of the beginning of the film Fin carries out relatively mundane tasks such as walking down a country road to the local grocery store, shopping for food, paying for groceries, and later visiting the library. The film’s mise-en-scène approximates (and, at times, exaggerates) ablebodied characters’ reactions to and interactions with him – whether attributable to him or not. While Browning’s film overemphasizes Cleo and Hercules’ belligerence, awkwardness and greed as eventually fatal (or at least maim-able) flaws, their monstrous characterizations and unscrupulous motivations in relation to the disabled actors on screen are predominantly one-dimensional and readily apparent to audiences and other characters in the film. Conversely, Fin’s initial interactions with objects, others and their motivations are not as clear. In the serendipitous scenes that bring Olivia and Fin together, narratively speaking at least, the audience knows more than Fin does. McCarthy’s use of long shots present

109 Not all the “normal,” able-bodied characters within the film are presented as monstrous. For example, Venus and Phroso are both sympathetic towards and outraged at Hans and Frieda’s plight.
Olivia’s eventually swerving car – once as Fin goes to the grocery store and the next upon his return – as initially non-threatening, but ominous. Each time she nearly runs him over. Even as this repetition elicits his semi-comical dives into the bushes to avoid her car, the acts, more importantly, threaten Fin’s safety in public – even if sparsely populated. For Fin, Olivia’s perilous driving is a real threat to his safety. For the viewer, shots of Olivia’s dropped glasses or spilled coffee make her distracted behaviour and its outcome humorous. Though she did not intend to scare pedestrian Fin, and offers to help him out of his predicament on both occasions, the conditions around their meeting here are perilous and hint at dangers of “contact” for both socially reclusive characters.

Our sharing in knowledge Fin does not have helps “play up” the reactions of others to him even if they are motivated by events or elements beyond his control. McCarthy exaggerates Fin’s difference as spectacle with the behaviour of an elderly shopkeeper at the sleepy “Good to Go Deli.” An establishing shot of Fin approaching the shop brings a sense of difference in physical scale between his height and the steps and door of the building (a recurring motif that McCarthy uses several times – notably with Fin next to a passing train, for example). Immediately after Fin enters, she stops her work at the front counter (just above a freezer full of “frozen novelties”) to gawk in semi-wonderment, reaching for something by the register. After a “Hey! Yoo-hoo,” she takes a picture of Fin as he – looking unimpressed – gets some milk from the fridge, making a record of him as a novelty and probable subject of conversation. With both cameras focused on Fin, his perspective of being eyelevel with the handle of a fridge door is redoubled. The shopkeeper’s invasive social behaviour, presumably too familiar to Fin, invites questions of privileges and double standards around personal and public space. After all, the film does not show her taking pictures of other customers. Later, Fin visits a larger store in town (presumably to avoid getting his snapshot) where the register blocks him out of the checkout girl’s sight. Here, the camera shares her perspective to prove how a seemingly innocuous object excludes a person of Fin’s stature from view. Soon, the taller person next in line gestures to the girl that someone is waiting to pay. Her indifferent response to Fin, “Sorry, I didn’t see you,” while a brief and funny moment, also reveals real inequities in public space that many people overlook, literally.

Outside of disability studies, one of the few critical discussions of The Station Agent describes it as “a limit cas[e] for embracing narratives of objectless or passive curiosity [to] observ[e] cultural attitudes toward curiosity, and the phenomenology of its various modes and manifestations” (Nandrea 337). This “embrace,” interestingly, occurs
through a presumptive passivity of taking in spectacle, and not specifically because of
the film’s relatively straightforward guy gets girl romance, quirky humour, emotionally
drawn relationships, variously flawed characters and quaint small-town, rural setting.
One of Nandrea’s interests in the film resides in “other people’s responses to [Fin, such
as] staring, mocking, ignoring (turning away), laughing, screaming, and taking his
picture” (348). While I agree, partially, that the reactions of “other people” generate
laughter and empathy for Fin as a likeable protagonist, not one of the acts she mentions
is passive or objectless – either onscreen or for the audience. Focusing solely upon the
film’s deliberately clichéd, stereotypical reactions to Fin’s embodiment limits his
dimensionality as a character. When contextualizing Nandrea’s summary with
discussions of staring, for example, Dinklage, through “sight gags” (Banks, qtd. in
Garland-Thomson 173), helps “upend[ed] conventional use of short-statured actors” by
employing “stare management” techniques (173). It is also important to consider
motivations behind the stare and repercussions of such deliberate framing. As
mentioned above, and as “gag” or not, having audiences reconsider space from Fin’s
perspective challenges stock representations of and responses to disability. Reminiscent
of a Freaks-like “horrific” sensationalized reaction to disability, for example, Emily’s
shriek as she notices Fin in the library occurs because until then she thought she was
alone, rather than her anticipating a frightening “curiosity.” Fin’s claim to space as a
disabled person in film and in a library invites questions of embodiment and viewer
reception.

Nandrea’s article takes in “approximately 200 viewer posts” (348) about the film
from a range of movie websites. Curiously, her survey features near exclusively
favorable posts about The Station Agent’s story and performances. One post she
includes does transgress (however slightly) from the feel-goodism of her exercise to
suggest that the “story could very well have been done without a little person, and would
have been just as good.” By bolstering the comment as a probable “well-intentioned
misrecognition” insofar as “the audience is led to disapprove of those who stare at Fin,
[while] we are staring at him too” (349), she also manages to pacify her role as a
“participa[nt] in disability discourse” (Markotić and Chivers 4). Nandrea’s safe, distant
glossing over of the significance of Dinklage’s performance and McCarthy’s film through
anonymous online comments endorses (along with her positivistic research) presumably

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110 From my experiences in researching the popular media portion of this chapter, comments
regarding disability and/in entertainment are seldom all positive.
able audiences to “embrace” disability as one-dimensional curiosity – something the film often, though not always, works against.

Before discussing Fin’s climactic “coming out” scene as a challenge to the stability of all the implied starers at the bar, to which I believe Nandrea’s communal stare comment refers, I want to mention, briefly, a review of The Station Agent that appears in the usually reputable film journal Sight & Sound. Leslie Felperin claims:

Ever since The Station Agent debuted at Sundance in 2003, critics have strained to find coy ways of likening the movie to its dwarf hero, Finbar McBride. ‘Small but perfectly formed’ and ‘a little movie with a big heart’ are the kind of descriptions that have been trotted out so far (though I prefer one wag’s wittier if rather more cruel ‘you can count on Mini-Me’). They’re all reasonably apt, but miss the point that The Station Agent is no ‘smaller’ or slighter in its reach and resonance than your average low-budget comedy-drama. (68)

In spite of Dinklage’s groundbreaking role in challenging cultural stereotypes of his embodiment (and the “all-good” online chatter his performance apparently generates), McCarthy’s “thoughtfulness” is unable to escape the inane ableist banter of film critics’ attempts to sell more copy. Felperin’s sanctioning of the very phrasal stereotypical sentimentalizing of dwarf actors the film negates as “apt” helps maintain distance between disability and its audience – especially for those who have not experienced the film – via the prod of cute puns. Her review, while favourable overall never really pushes past middling acclaim, sticks close to the film’s relatively straightforward storylines and avoids discussions of the performances, embodiments and social relationships that make the film (not excluding its award-winning performances) noteworthy. By chiming in with the witticisms above, while useful to point out, does she mean to suggest “we” as her audience are all thinking along similar demeaning, jokey lines? Or, as Nandrea implies, do we all stare at Fin in the same ways for the same reasons? These “strains” of academic and cultural criticism reinforce how acceptable stereotypes of disability manage to bolster normative boundaries.

Fin, rather than being a static, passive character spoken for or made to wear shoes that “curl up at the end,” embodies moments of mild social panic. He certainly is no “hero” either, though Felperin describes him as such, perhaps in the context of his confrontation with Emily’s abusive boyfriend, which I will discuss. Under dominant, heteronormative ideology, and linguistic othering, however, he becomes heroic by playing a non-cliché dwarf. The dangers inherent in such a rhetorical move serve to reinforce the “specialness” of Dinklage’s role, rather than critiquing it on its own terms. The final scenes I discuss encompass Fin’s visiting the bar – twice. Though he mentions
to Joe several times that he is uncomfortable going to bars, he does enjoy a drink. As the film and its friendships build, Fin eventually agrees to meet Joe and his convalescing dad at “The Mill” for a few beers. He shows up on his own, framed by a stationary camera near the entrance, and proceeds to a barstool. The resultant view reflects that of an observer, or that he is almost always observed in public. Again, in a serendipitous meeting (certainly believable in a small town) he encounters Emily who’s been stood up by her “jerk” boyfriend, Chris. In very little screen time she reveals to Fin that she is pregnant with Chris’s child and not too pleased at the prospect. Shortly after, Fin (who has also been stood up) and Emily decide to leave together. A long shot frames their different statures in the context of the pub and railway tracks on the way to her car. Chris then arrives, presumably having shared a similar (off-screen, diegetic) view of the couple. Possibly inebriated, and physically abusive towards Emily, he asks if Fin is her “little friend.” Fin intervenes with an arm outstretched to keep Chris from Emily, nervously telling him, “Don’t do that!” and becomes a victim of violence when Chris shoves him into the side of Emily’s car. After Emily implores Fin to “just go away,” he walks off as the sun sets while Chris calls him a “freak.” Fin’s motivations in this scene, both as a friend to Emily and because of her recently revealed pregnancy, bring together the heteroableist, masculinist and spatial threads of my discussion. Though scripted, Chris’s ablebodied aggression towards disability occurs in a heteromasculine context, and precisely because he sees Fin and Emily together in public. Whether he considers Fin a threat to his masculinity or sexual ability, or not, his derogatory “little friend” comment implies Fin is childlike and sexually impotent. Fin’s subsequent protection of Emily (however brief) maintains his masculinity for Emily and the audience alike. Though no sex takes place between Fin and Emily during the film, his intervention on her behalf, to return to Kim, rehabilitates his disability in heteronormative terms just enough to bring her to his door the next night. Chris’s use of the term “freak,” with full oppressive, violent connotations – and acts – also defines his idea of normative space.

This brief yet tense exchange responds thematically and inverts some of the narrative and performative considerations in Browning’s film. Chris’s aggression certainly qualifies as monster-like – given his past taunts towards Fin outside Joe’s food truck early in the film and his pejorative use of “freak” to mark Fin’s stature and behaviour. After all, echoing the tag-line of *Freaks*, how dare Fin stand between a “real man” and his woman? Fin’s actions lend non-typical dimensionality to Joe’s earlier encouragement of masculinity and, of course, different than in Browning’s film, and others, Fin, as a
diminutive sexualized character is not framed as a biological threat to the woman he likes. Instead, their implied romantic relationship begins, at least according to Emily, because of a threat against Fin from the more able-bodied Chris. Her arrival at Fin’s station door to apologize for Chris’s behaviour provides a brief conversation that brings some levity to Fin’s character. After sharing some brief information about the historical role of a station agent, he refers to himself as a retiree and offers some flirtatious dialogue in return. “Dwarves retire early, common fact,” he says. Their intimate, though visually obscured kiss (image above) leads to Emily asking if she can stay over – “just sleep” – and them lying at opposite ends of his couch – suggesting that something more might have taken place.

Similar to his relationship with Emily, Fin and Olivia share a sense of lack. Wanting to check up on Olivia, who is still “coming to terms” with her various losses, Fin is surprisingly and emotionally shut out as she declares “I’m not your fucking girlfriend or your mother . . . You’re not a child!” The double entendre here, given Olivia’s longing for her son, leads Fin to return to “The Mill” to drown his sorrows. The camera’s perspective blurs, the soundtrack emulates drunken nattering and Fin’s demeanour hardens. After several drinks and focus/out of focus images of a sinister-looking Chris and his belligerent side kick (who brings over what appears to be a no-hard feelings-consolation-beer along with a pat on the back), the audio and image realign in real time to Fin’s clearing off the bar in front of him. Returning to tensions of looking as not knowing, he climbs up and implores a pub full of patrons: “Here I am! Take a look! Take a look!” In a bold move of balance and of dictating the mode of “stare management” (Garland-Thomson 172), he manages to affirm disability’s phenomenological qualities as spectacle, but more importantly his staggering four-foot five-inch body wrests an oppressive medium of exploitation – as numerous films featuring stereotypes of dwarves illustrate – into his own control. In other words, his self-exploitive act in “making his body count” deflates the speculative murmurs – real or imaginary – around his embodiment, surely creating more. Insisting those starers have a “good look” whether they want to, or not, indicates a successful performance. By commanding his own claims to spectacle without the agreement of the dominant majority (in the room or in the theatre seats) he re-appropriates the role of a sideshow Barker (akin to the Barker in Freaks) who tells us where to step and stare while playing up the “living, breathing, monstrosities” in our view. With his bodily differences in public space, Fin takes charge of the show as the show on his (although drunken) terms. Ironically, his perilous walk home almost gets him killed by
You Just have to be a Good Looking Crip to Get The Part

“I guess I was an easy target and the only reason I was picked on was because I am small.” (Henderson)

In an episode of the fake documentary series Life’s Too Short, Warwick Davis reveals his ineptitude as an agent for the dwarf actors he represents by suggesting there is sparse demand for “nobodies” to play non-stereotypical roles. He does, however, capitulate to creating a show reel for his clients that features brief satirical performances of Brokeback Mountain and Passion of the Christ, for example. Davis suggests off camera (so to speak) that he “do[esn’t] mind giving false hope, but not on [his] expense” (“Episode 1.3”). Keeping in mind the satirical intent of the show, the direction of its scorn points to the woeful financing and support of diversity in the mainstream film and television industry. Davis’s comment also reveals the real sociotextual inequities in terms of dignified representations for disabled actors and those who “choose,” or put more accurately, those who “earn” such roles.

Just as it is difficult to qualify how or why any actor might turn down a role in Browning’s Freaks in post-depression Hollywood – though several ablebodied actors did after realizing who else was cast in the film – is it that easy to say no? Returning to an excerpt of the New York Times piece that brings Dinklage to a massive audience, he discusses his feelings after his shout-out of support to Henderson following last year’s Emmy win and suggests,

People [we]re all, like, I dedicated it to him [and] the[y] made [the gesture] more romantic than it actually was. I just wanted to go, ‘This is screwed up.’ Dwarves
are still the butt of jokes. It’s one of the last bastions of acceptable prejudice. Not just by people who’ve had too much to drink in England and want to throw a person. But by media, everything [. As a dwarf actor you can say no. You can not be the object of ridicule. (Kois)

While Dinklage’s claim seems fair, it also relies on having the ability to choose in the first place. Borrowing from Goffman’s idea of the “performance of everyday life” and how the process encompasses disability (and as a segue to my next chapter on performance), Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander note how “disabled people talk about performing their identities in explicitly self-conscious and theatrical terms” (2). This realization brings new considerations in the context of Dinklage’s filmic achievements amidst ideological and practical pressures of ableism, including requisites of hetero and bodily normativity. Again, Hillary Swank’s Oscar-winning role as a boxer who would rather die than live as a quadriplegic in Million Dollar Baby (2004) signifies a range of socioeconomic, performative and bodily values directly linked to the entertainment industry and the possibilities of a life with or death industry and the possibilities of a life with or death without disability.111

By beginning and ending this chapter with journalistic pop-culture impressions and frames of disability I hope (not falsely) to provide accessible theoretical and culturally applicable discussions to affirm ways – as Browning’s Freaks and McCarthy’s The Station Agent each do in their own contexts – to challenge “experiences of alterity that systematically prohibit disabled people from meaningful social participation” (Snyder, Mitchell 16). Providing models of disability that exist beyond representation as artistic material reflective of actual experiences and embodiments might encourage more people to challenge public spaces and perceptions along with the perpetual financing of our bodily and cultural anxieties.

Chapter Three:
Giving Notice or Being Noticed? Embodiment, Performance and Other Stages of Disability

“[T]he disabled figure continues to be available to all comers in unending supply.”
(Victoria Ann Lewis, Beyond Victims and Villains)

People with Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD, chronic depression, chronic anxiety, personality disorders, and other mental health challenges are, on the whole, non-violent and law-abiding citizens. Many of the people dearest to me have mental health challenges. I have spent a great deal of time in my life getting to know people from across the Autism spectrum. They are among the kindest and gentlest I have ever known (Jon-Paul Fiorentino, "Please, Just Continue to be Michael's Mother").

Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute. Mere words! Was there anything so real as words?
(Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray 19-20).

“The tone of the violin is more ample than that of the guitar” (Kaspar Hauser, qtd. in Handke, 61).

“I mean to say that a sentence is a monster” (Peter Handke, Kaspar 139).

In March 2013, Canada’s parliament began debate of Bill C-54, the “Not Criminally Responsible Reform Act.” Announced by Stephen Harper a month earlier through mainstream, corporate media, the bill intends to make it more difficult for someone to be found not guilty of a criminal act due to mental illness or, to borrow a more dominant cultural phrase/concept, by “reason of insanity.” Though such “reforms” might seem relatively innocuous to many, or understandable, even desirable, for some victims of crime, the kairos of Harper’s “Act” coincides with a very real tragedy. It also contributes to the manufacturing of social panic and, as I have discussed previously, the sociocultural inequity of those who identify with cognitive and physical disabilities and their representations in texts.

Following the Newtown tragedy, mainstream media’s initial focus upon the autistic tendencies of its perpetrator, Adam Lanza, implied his motivation to mass murder. Rationalizing, or framing, his crime in this way establishes, maintains and reinforces an exaggerated sociocultural relationship between autism and violent
behaviour\textsuperscript{112} – a link that Jon-Paul Fiorentino (above) and many others observe as false. As Heather Stuart suggests, "research supports the view the mentally ill are more often victims than perpetrators of violence ("Violence and Mental Illness"). Affirming a (largely mythical) public threat of mental illness perpetuates an unnecessary cycle of social panic that the Canadian Conservative government’s bill contributes to and, more tellingly, is likely to legalize. Within what I call “deliberate monstering” writ large in our cultural imaginary, former Justice Minister (and current Liberal MP) Irwin Cotler cautions: “from the Prime Minister’s recent announcement of the legislation, one could easily get the impression that Canada is overrun with dangerous psychopaths and that Canadians should be fearful” (“Policy Should Not Mistake the Mentally Ill for Criminals”). Cotler’s observation not only reveals real, life-affecting processes of ablenationalism that further discount (and distrust) people with disabilities in Canada, but also affirms the significant roles of the state and media to shape Harper’s message as “tough on crime” for the public – many of whom were certainly aware of the loss of 26 lives in a Connecticut elementary school a few weeks earlier.

The timing of the Harper government’s bill becomes an auspicious political tool by invoking an expanded sense of able-continentalism. The ease with which an over-determined statistically negligible causality between mental illness and violent crime is framed for the public as a national benefit raises a troubling, familiar double standard of disability inequity. As Cotler suggests, “the reality is that these cases are exceptionally rare and these reforms have more to do with public perception than public safety.” Disability as an unstable ontology and concept, then, also becomes a useful sociopolitical, corporate tool. And here, the multivalent processes of ablenationalism, or “the degree to which treating people with disabilities as an exception valorizes able-bodied norms of inclusion as the naturalized qualification of citizenship” (Snyder, Mitchell 113), become clearer.

On February 12, 2013, – just four days after Harper’s Bill C-54 announcement – Bell, a media and communications conglomerate, facilitated a well-promoted national “mental health” advertising campaign entitled, “Bell, Let’s Talk,”\textsuperscript{113} during which Bell

\textsuperscript{112} The 2011 “thriller” We Need to Talk About Kevin stars Tilda Swinton as Eva, who copes with the murderous aftermath of her thought-to-be autistic, psychopathic son, Kevin (Ezra Miller).

\textsuperscript{113} It is important to note that Bell’s “charity campaign” is a direct result of a “$3.4-billion Bell takeover of Astral Media, which was blocked by the CRTC last fall. That proposal included a promise to put $3.5-million more into Let’s Talk as part of an additional benefit pledge [and] mental health support had been lumped in with promises to spend more supporting Canadian talent – something which the CRTC said was inappropriate” (Weisblott). Even with such
“donated” five cents to “mental health initiatives” across Canada for every text message or long distance call over Bell’s network by Bell’s customers. The spokesperson for the campaign was Clara Hughes. Her often-smiling face on billboards, bus shelters, in print and throughout numerous interviews on an array of Bell’s TV stations about her “battles” with depression, made her previous achievements as a summer and winter Olympic multi-medalist seem even more extraordinary – and equally as competitive. While her success in sport is admirable and her ongoing experiences with cognitive disability/disorder important to recognize and discuss, her viewer-friendly story of overcoming/coping with disability in such a packaged format implies “your donation” will assist others who need help to achieve the same. After all, if Clara can do it, you can too, right?

Consider the motivations of Bell’s smiley imperative, “Let’s Talk:” if the goal of their campaign is to raise awareness of mental illness or “health,” surely, a neoliberal push to get us “all talking”(while mindful of Alexander Graham Bell’s audist oppressions), with the compassion and vocality of a hash tag, also raises Bell’s corporate profile and profits via the sympathies and problems of those it claims to assist with donations. Though Bell’s use of populist discourse and cultural practice of texting is significant, amidst shrinking corporate taxes and inadequate infrastructure, staffing and in-home care, might Bell use its corporate clout to insist upon improving legal, material and economic conditions for disability rather than gate-

regulatory objections, Bell’s takeover of Astral was successful in March 2013. What, exactly, are Bell’s motivations as a direct funder of mental health “awareness”? good corporate citizenship? 114 The phrase is from Bell’s website, which also lists its partners, including major hospitals and the Canadian Mental Health Association. According to a recent press release (30 Apr. 2013), such “initiatives” include the ablenationalistic “True Patriot Love Fund” to improve access to mental health resources (via their grant-awarding process) on Canadian military bases, large and small, including their sponsorship of “the True Patriot Love Tribute Dinner through 2014.” While vague on many details, Bell notes the monetary cost of “mental illness” for healthcare, businesses, lost worker productivity and the Canadian economy as more than “51 billion dollars a year.” Here, Bell’s patriotic “benevolence” subsumes the state’s role (and taxes) in taking care of its soldiers and their families.

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keeping corporate benevolence?\textsuperscript{115}

After individualizing Clara’s problems and successes, Bell’s enabling of texting as aid, then, also individualizes solutions while subsuming the collective, supportive role of the state and its material responsibilities to its citizens in favour of opportunistic advertising and corporate tax breaks. As their dedicated website suggests, “Bell has taken the initiative to address mental illness in the workplace and at home, helping to make our communities healthier and more productive [with] the creation of an overall culture of mental health support across the Canadian business landscape.” Assuming we all are a part of such an abstract, but very able-orientated geography of Canadian business, then healthy minds must make for healthy bottom lines.\textsuperscript{116} The smiley face on the ad also indicates how such discourse taps into the morass of social media/texting as popular enjoyment. Furthermore, the ableist/consumerist imperative of Bell’s campaign promotes a “fix” or “improvement” to national mental health discourse through a directive to consumers to practice behaviours that increase Bell’s revenues, wrapped (or, texted, tweeted or long-distance-called) in moral and social responsibility. What of those who don’t want to (or can’t) talk? As problematically, Hughes’s pleasant face of “mental health” and the campaign’s associative language of achievement gloss over – or, perform – ability over systematic and representational inequities (what else does mental health look like?), while directly promoting a corporate empire and its products as something good for the national psyche, or, in other words, as corporate, consumer-sanctioned ablenationalism.

As I discuss in the introduction to my thesis, eugenicist and inventor Alexander Graham Bell’s attempts to outlaw sign language\textsuperscript{117} for deaf communities in favour of

\textsuperscript{115}A quick view of their website reveals groups have to fill out a form (after entering one’s postal code) to qualify for funding from $5000 to $50000.

\textsuperscript{116}Ironically, perhaps, and certainly active in recent popular economic talk-show discourse are assessments of successful corporate CEOs as psychopathic (including John Ronson’s bestseller \textit{The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry} [2011] among others). This profiling also aligns with the thesis of the 2003 film, \textit{The Corporation}, which maintains that, as legal “people,” corporations and their behaviour are often pathological and dangerous to society. Of note, subsequent social media popularity of Bell’s campaign invites grassroots use of hegemonic ideology for potential counterhegemonic purposes. As ‘The Eric Chalmers’ sums up on Twitter Jan. 8, 2014: “BELL LETS TALK DAY IS ON JANUARY 28TH SO YOU BETTER TWEET ALL DAY ABOUT EVERYTHING!!”

\textsuperscript{117}In addition to Harlan Lane’s work establishing Bell’s aggressive eugenicist/audist interventions and inventions in favour of a hearing society, Lewis notes “the deaf and hard-of-hearing were forbidden use of their language by hearing educators [such as] Bell” (xviii) in a colonial act of language erasure.
speaking (eventually through his telephone) provides a compelling temporal thread that pulls cultural and economic biases in line with present-day ableism and its corporate-nationalist aspirations. Correctives of “charity” (Bell) and the state’s legal crackdown on undesirables (Harper’s social panic bill) do little more than sell/perform safety through opposing images of disability – or, in neoliberal terms, playing to all audiences. Increasing institutionalization (or, incarceration) while advertising a positive face of fixing disability maintains its palatable metaphorical status as something other than its own range of experiences – from oppressive to celebratory. If the state, its corporate media and their “deliberate monstering” of disability (as Adam Lanza and others embody) successfully defines/redefines/shapes disability into saleable, vote-getting ends, what does valuing disability differently (and on its own not-so-palatable terms) achieve? And, why is that important?

This chapter will investigate how notions of performance and language bind together in a contract of mental, physical and communicative ability to reveal significant inequities – in part due to critical and creative assertions that maintain disability’s roles as metaphors that often synthesize non-disabled experiences, as well as those that do not. Largely through the cultural-imaginative weight of the historical, enigmatic “wild boy” autistic figure Kaspar Hauser, Peter Handke’s language play, *Kaspar*, illustrates – in resonate sociohistorical fashion – a troubling representation of (non)normative embodiment. Handke’s bombardment of imperative correctives induced by a “magic eye” (59) above the stage coerces Kaspar to “normalcy” on stage – for a time. As both a counter to Handke’s prompters’ imperatives and to loosen ties of ablenationalism at work beyond the text, I also consider a performance that features cognitive and physical disability (and its technology) as a primary site of narrative, spatial and romantic tension in more experiential, dimensional, and less metaphorical and aggressive terms. John Belluso’s short work, *Voice Properties (On A First Date After A Full Year Of Februarys)*, features a character on a date who uses a wheelchair and vocalizing device; the play undoes considerable stereotypes of disability experience in accessible fashion to reflect alternate ways of communicating, embodiment and desire. Each work questions dominant narrative expectations and reflects communication as linguistic slippage.
Kaspar, or Why Clowns and Ghosts Aren’t That Much Fun

“Kaspar (Kasper means clown in German) does not resemble any other comedian; rather, when he comes on stage he resembles Frankenstein’s monster (or King Kong).” (Handke 60)

As a romanticized autistic figure, enlightenment-era “success story,” noble-savage, autistic-savant, and as a postmodern victim/resister of imperative interrogation, Kaspar Hauser and his seemingly enigmatic “problems” come into focus through numerous narratives of fact and fiction. Amidst new troubling realities of state criminalization and corporate “care” for disability, it is important to maintain spaces for the cultural and literary significance of disability. Kaspar’s embodiment of very real failings inherent in corrective, orderly ideologies of language, imagery, media and performance, while symbolic of disorder, reflects socioeconomic unease for people with disabilities. As Kaspar past and present continues to “satisfy” and confuse audiences,

At right, the cover image for the English DVD version of Werner Herzog’s The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser (1974) features a prostrate Kaspar as victim and, at left, a promotional image for Ryan Kiggell’s London performance of Handke’s play (2011) with Kaspar fixed beneath the only factual/fictional sentence (here ghettoized) he possesses upon being discovered. Kaspar’s obscured facial identity (by his own hand) and rigid posture in each image arguably contributes to stereotypes of autism and disability in socially marginalized terms. These images of Kaspar mark his character as undesirable and powerless.

the images above – and the performances they invite us to take in – imply disability is an ontology without identity. Even as these Kaspars base themselves upon (and certainly garner cachet from) people with autism, I believe, along with many in the field (Carrie Sandahl, Susan Wendell, Simi Linton and others), that representations of disability – and
their discourses – must also consider the experiences of those who identify as disabled. What happens to the smiling face of mental illness, or “health” here? What happens to the feel good, money-sharing, complicit consumerism of talking (or, texting) about it?

Echoing what I mention in chapter two about how discussions of disabled embodiment are often cast in performative terms insofar as people who identify as disabled often feel as though they are on stage and feel noticed by others, late playwright, John Belluso, talks about how getting on a public bus is a performance. He says:

Any time I get on a public bus, I feel like it’s a moment of theater. I’m lifted, the stage is moving up and I enter, and people are along the lines, and they’re turning and looking, and I make my entrance. It’s theater, and I have to perform. And I feel like we as disabled people are constantly onstage, and we’re constantly performing. We have to make the choice either to perform or not to perform. There are times when it’s fantastic to perform your disability, it’s joyful, and it’s powerful. Like when I enter on the bus, I love it. I really feel like it’s an entrance, like, “I’m ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille.” (qtd. in Sandahl, Auslander “Introduction” 2)

As though impossible to pass/hide or “not perform,” many disabled people and performers (rather than exaggerate their disability) embrace their bodies and/or behaviours without prosthetics, without covering up or without performing, or, simply, perform as themselves. As Simi Linton suggests, this initially difficult practice shares an affinity with realizing queer identity. In Claiming Disability she shares a story of meeting a disabled woman at a conference for whom “coming out” was a process that began when she recognized how her effort to “be like everyone else” was not satisfying her own needs and wishes. She discovered other disabled people and began to identify clearly as disabled, and then purchased a motorized scooter, which meant she didn’t have to expend enormous energy walking. She told this tale with gusto, obviously pleased with the psychic and physical energy she had gained. (20-1)

While this condensed narrative may imply ease and happiness, the positivity she receives from arguably “being like herself” affirms the power and agency that Belluso’s bus ride provides. The dominant cultural practice to “be like everyone else” echoes the (mythical and mass produced) choice-less aspect of McRuer’s compulsorily

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118 My own experiences with cerebral palsy reflect Linton’s point. Often stared at, called out, bullied or asked questions about “what’s wrong with the way I walk,” I was given the option, by a well-meaning orthopaedic surgeon to “walk like everyone else.” At age 14, I agreed. Twenty-five years after my two “corrective” surgeries, stares have turned to more subtle glances and a less frequent question: “what’s wrong with your leg?” To which I usually respond, “which one?,” or, “nothing. That’s how I walk.”
ablebodiedness – or, what Linton’s friend reveals as an unsatisfying experience. Her resistance through not resisting, or through identifying as disabled helps expose the hegemonic work of ablenationalism that “valorizes able-bodied norms of inclusion as the naturalized qualification of citizenship” (Snyder, Mitchell 113). In Reading Embodied Citizenship, Emily Russell discusses the sociohistorical unevenness of agency between normative and disabled subjects, and confirms that the body politic “traditional[ly] align[s] with the physical body” (7). That such limitations exist for disability (especially in the public sphere)119 allows ablenationalism to persist in/as a singular and able imaginary. If its myths (and socio-structural realities) function through “degree[s of] treating people with disabilities as an exception” (Snyder, Mitchell 113), then people with disabilities (such as Linton, her friend, or Belluso) who turn their exceptional treatment into exceptional experiences help create and maintain a positive rupture or slip in an ableist-assumed cultural imaginary and socioeconomic practices, such as those policed via the “normate” (Garland-Thomson 45) that I discuss in chapter two.

On the uneasy subject of coming out and disability empowerment, Linton suggests, “Shame and fear are personal burdens, but if these tales are told, we can demonstrate how the personal is indeed the political [and] the unexamined connections between the personal and the political are the curricular” (21). Although writing in the late 90s, the correlation Linton maps out offers still under-examined spaces of how the experiential model of disability – and its unity – necessitates political, “accessible” changes to our society. Doing so provides new ways to consider, and teach, how the social and the text intertwine in compatible and not so compatible ways to reveal productive problems and to reinforce systematic inequities. My literary disability theory perspective cannot exist without the experiences, histories and achievements of disability and its people – from anecdotes to people using wheelchairs on busy city buses. In much of everyday public space and experience, normalcy is often performed (as best as possible) to assure others of capability, of independence or a disabled version of it. Belluso’s unapologetic experience is arguably non-enigmatic in part

119 A recent article in The Tyee discusses the imminent replacement of Vancouver’s public transportation component for people with disabilities with taxicabs. The representative for the drivers’ union Mark Beeching notes, “Disabled people and seniors seem not to be included in the [BC] Liberal party’s family. Providing safe, custom public transportation is a cost savings to the health care system. The question shouldn’t be ‘How can we afford stable funding for HandyDART?’; it should be ‘How can we afford not to?’” The provincial government’s cost-cutting also negates the trained experience of drivers for the “free-market” fact that “Taxi drivers will be placed in the unfortunate position of making HandyDART passengers wait while they take more lucrative trips” (qtd. in Sandborn).
because it generates positive cultural values reflective of his unique identity – as a result of social empowerment in spite of its sanctioned oppression or “exception.”

Belluso’s “‘ready for [a] close-up’” (Sandahl, Auslander “Introduction” 2) reflections provide us with a productive, seldom-shared perspective to mediate the bodily directives within language, performance and disabled experience. Like Handke’s Kaspar, a play that exposes language’s inability to impose and enforce an ableist identity upon a disabled character, Belluso’s own experience – like his work – exposes narrative and performative possibilities of asserting non-typical embodiments as themselves or, as normal, and helps insist upon a new genre of theatre (or approach to disability on stage) in the process. As Sandahl suggests, “Belluso’s successful career as a playwright and television writer generated great interest in new disability theatre [that] aims to explore the lived experience of disability rather than the usual dramaturgical use of disability as a metaphor for non-disabled people’s sense of outsiders” (“Why Disability Identity Matters” 226). While many in the field of disability studies would agree with moving away from “the usual dramaturgical use” of disability – from representational and performative perspectives – I also believe the “new” in disability theatre exists in recovering/reexamining the innovative and problematic from the (perhaps) older mode of disability as prosthetic (Mitchell, Snyder), or to make the able bodies in the audience feel “something else” that usually reasserts the safety, preferability and dominance of normativity in the cultural imaginary through a metaphor we can all understand. In her text, Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre, Kirsty Johnston rightly argues for the “centrality of performance to any critical thinking of disability” (12). Further, and significant to my own discussions of sociotextual inequities and the often discounted, devalued experiences of disability relative to its figurative agency, she notes the importance of “re-imagining disability as a valued human condition” (5, 154).

Similar to my discussions in chapter one of the metaphorical roles of many of Beckett’s characters as emblematic of the perils and pressures of modernity and the modern condition for “everyman,” Kaspar and the “speech torture” (59) he endures signifies the oppression of the state upon individuals’ freedoms in Europe of the late 1960s and counterculture possibilities. Such metaphorical “universality” also produces aspects of disability’s phenomenological and artistic values as an aesthetic – to “promot[e] variation, self-transformation and beauty.” “Nevertheless,” Tobin Siebers

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120 Of course, it was also a time of counterculture possibilities such as R.D. Laing’s anti-psychiatry and subsequent mad pride movements.
continues, “the radical gesture of rooting aesthetics in the representation of the disabled body produces an interpretive dilemma, one first discovered by the Nazis and still found almost everywhere in the art world today.” Though contextualizing disability as a significant aesthetic of modern art here — of which theatre is arguably a part — Siebers’ “interpretive dilemma,” similar to Sandahl’s observations, resides in the “beholder[s’] cho[ice] whether to embrace or to reject the strong feelings excited by disability” (40). My discussion of sociotextual inequity allows for opportunities between either/or designations for disability and/or an audience’s receptivity to its presence on a canvas, stage or in narrative. Part of disability’s successful embodiment as artistic, cultural material, I believe, resides in its refusal to adhere to binaries — as representation and as experience.

The problematic, often ablenationalistic historical insistence upon disability as one thing (i.e. enigmatic) that would be better off as another thing (i.e. erased, hidden, corrected) occurs when disability signifies something other than itself as a means to validate normative bodies and behaviours. For example, Denis Calandra describes the Kaspar Hauser of history as a significant part of a “wild boy phenomenon” (64). Although Kaspar did not reside in the forest (literally), according to numerous sources he was neglected by his parents and lived much of his first sixteen years in isolated conditions. The sensationalism around the “wild boy” fuels hyperbole that dominant cultural practice and memory attaches to disability (and, by extension, its people) — in this case for nearly 200 years. In his 2005 article, “Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children,” James Berger situates Kaspar Hauser as “confirming a Rousseau-like view of natural goodness” and suggests:

The Enlightenment wild child functioned as a thought experiment that permitted the social-linguistic person to be separated from some more primal existence as noble or ignoble savage, animal or divinity. The wild child was the case in point that would illustrate, if not determine, the most important and troubling questions about human subjectivity, language, moral development, and social organization. If only they could be taught to speak, wild children would tell for the first time of human existence outside language; they would give testimony of Eden, just before Adam named the world and before he learned transgression. But the experiment was not a success. Many of the documented wild children in retrospect appear to have been mentally retarded or autistic. (346)

One of Siebers’s compelling arguments in Disability Aesthetics follows from the Nazi banning of “degenerate art” that often features the disabled body in some way and this phenomenon occurs because of powerful aesthetic value — one he also suggests as a motivator for vandalism of art, as a way for the creator/vandal to make “new disability art” more reflective of his/her lived experience.

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The wild boy “phenomenon” that Handke’s play derives much of its energy from as an often-sanitized model of historical enlightenment emerges as a coercive form of spectacle, “with set lighting bright as an operating room that makes us shrink away from the front row seats” (Coutts C11). Though the play ends unsuccessfully as a model of enlightened, or religiously sanctioned, purity for the “primal” object of Handke’s sociolinguistic barrage, Berger makes room to appropriate the wild boy idea for the present, suggesting, “contemporary portrayals of such individuals focus less on innate ideas and moral qualities and more on the nature of consciousness as a physical or spiritual condition and on the nature of the boundary between a nonlinguistic alterity and the social-symbolic order” (347). By extension, then, do Handke’s supposed impulses become more palatable here? Traversing and transgressing centuries (as disability does), Berger’s individualistic focus attempts to shed morality as a motivator to correct a person like Kaspar (Hauser)’s physical and spiritual “conditions.” This shift of materiality from body to symbol often negates the disabled body/character/representation in its own right while relegating real considerations of embodiment and experience to the figurative domain. Yet, somehow the wild boy – from enlightenment to the present – becomes less innate and more concrete, less of a moral concern and more indicative of margins, of spatial, ideological and orderly boundaries that maintain a disturbing eugenic violence of fascism. What happens to disability in this process? What boundaries do those marked, defined and constrained by it take up? In apparently immoral space, marginalized, objectified “conditions” of physical and/or linguistic embodiment become “conditional” of something else. Berger’s attempt to give agency to people like Kaspar Hauser, while thoughtful, places the onus of an arbitrary failure upon the subject rather than the sociolinguistic experiments (which begat invasive eugenic experiments in the decades to follow) and experimenters. What do these “wild children” offer, exactly, apart from retrospective sadness due to their collective disabilities? My point is that presentations of disability on the page, stage or screen are seldom either/or (in this case either experiential or metaphorical) in shaping their narratives.

Disability-as-metaphor (some more “successful” and problematic than others) creates much disabled experience and part of our job as writers, performers and theorists is to challenge and rearrange oppressive constructs to create new, inclusive ones. This is what I think Belluso’s work, which I will discuss later, does. His work also invokes and challenges problematic metaphoric constructions from a privileged (disabled) subject position. Whether or not a character’s “outsiderness” (Sandahl)
provides a means for audiences to feel better about themselves, to feel differently (though shared connections, etc.), is, I believe, crucial to the performative power of disability, as a shared cultural form of entertainment and experience.

The troubling, disruptive potential of ablenationalism, compulsory ablebodiedness, and the processes of how disability “valorizes able-bodied norms of inclusion as the naturalized qualification of citizenship” (Snyder, Mitchell 113), appear in both disabled figures, the real, historical Kaspar Hauser and Handke’s “Kaspar.” Each disabled figure interpolates/narrates/ performs a version of wanting to “be like someone else,” to affirm ability over disability – even as their disabilities generate narrative value in the first place. Similarly, Hughes’s pleasant face of “mental health” and Bell’s imperative “Let’s Talk” perform ability over a range of inequities that disrupt the imperative’s normative ends. While not as affirming as Linton’s friend’s “coming out” as disabled, however, the figurative power of an “able end” insists upon significant ideological space that seldom reflects our lived experiences. As a result, narratives, and the lives that materialize them – historicized or staged – often work against their own declarations. As June Schlueter remarks in The Plays and Novels of Peter Handke,

[Kaspar is] well known in German literature [as] an autistic young man who appeared in Nuremberg in 1828, after some sixteen years of presumably solitary existence, in possession of only one sentence: “A sochener Reiter mocht i warn, wei mei Voter aner gween is” (“I want to become a horseman like my father once was”). (41)

The Kaspar Hauser of history, ironically, gives a voice to McRuer’s unspoken question: “wouldn’t you rather be more like me?” (93). Kaspar’s “only” sentence designates a desire to be more capable than he is, presumably, in order to be like his physically able father. Similarly, Handke’s “Kaspar” (who eventually becomes multiple Kaspars) also possesses and repeats a single sentence: “I want to be someone like somebody else was once” (133). Both figures, then, maintain slippery disabled identities desirous of able ontology – although Handke’s Kaspar aspires to a displaced, non-subjective ontology – or at least one not of their own anchored to the written and/or spoken word.

In addition to autism, Kaspar’s historical character/referent also possesses “no knowledge of human society, and he could scarcely walk” (Kuhn, Peter Handke: Plays: 1 xv). While much of the play (which I discuss more specifically in my next section) establishes Kaspar’s tensions with a force-fed language-based identity and its spatial correctives/directives, very little, if any, discussion exists relative to physical disabilities and their relationship with/to his identity. As Kuhn’s correlative connotes, there exists a
very real relationship between understanding and having access to the social for Kaspar Hauser. Handke appropriates this apparently limited mobility to suggest locomotion, and negotiations of space and objects (furniture) on stage construct/represent identity for Handke’s Kaspar – akin in some ways to Browning’s framing of Hans and Frieda as proportional in their trailer. Ironically, as Handke’s play makes quite clear, Kaspar’s perpetually imbalanced “highly mechanical and artificial” movements, which include “shaking,” “throw[ing and] drag[ging] his leg[s] laboriously” and putting “the wrong foot first” (64), disappear as he gains language. A question I explored in connection to discussions of mobility in Beckett’s Murphy resurfaces here: Do stable movements necessitate stable identity?

Regardless of his (at least temporary) fictive physical and linguistic success, Kaspar is subject to very real normative, critical enforcement. In her article “Peter Handke’s Kaspar: The Mechanics of Language – a Fractioning Schizophrenic Theatrical Event,” Bettina Knapp writes: “Kaspar’s stiff gestures do not conform to the spectators’ perceptions of a human being” (251). Thus, Kaspar’s presence upon the stage exposes the inadequacy of either/or designations and tensions between binaries of normalcy and disability. Such a value-laden assumption of what a human being is invites “dismodern” (Davis 9) experiential perspectives that allow for a range of aesthetics and ontologies as “human” for performers and audiences alike, as part of the process and practice of “re-imagining disability as a valued human condition” (Johnston 5, 154). As disability can challenge what informs and perpetuates the subjectivity of similar perceptions, Knapp’s further summation that “such creatures are and have been popular from time immemorial – whetting the imagination, titillating the senses, and generating ripples of laughter” (251, italics my own), frustrates considerations of the play beyond the figurative, while also assuming a position of ablebodiedness. Disability does retain popularity in literature and on stage for the reasons she cites, yet creatures such as Kaspar certainly garner more significance than the marginality and effacement caricature

122 Handke’s vague description of Kaspar’s locomotion as “constant[ly] chang[e] from one way of moving to another” and further as a “convoluted progress” (64) in laborious semi-comedic fashion resonate with Samuel Beckett’s “Watt” – a character whose movements are eventually dictated by the way in which he speaks. In the latter third of the novel, the narrator witnesses Watt (advancing backwards) through the grounds of a house with a “blood[ied face and] hands” (159). His physical staggers (amongst trees and thorny bushes) emulate his linguistic staggers, and cause bodily harm. His entry into the world of speech brings a humorous yet disconcerting image: “Wonder I, said Watt, pankey-hanky me lend you could, blood away wipe[?]” (159-60). Like Kaspar, Watt does not need to fit within linguistic order to exist. He seems physically driven by his own unique syntax. The narrator normalizes Watt’s ontology, suggesting, “As Watt walked, so now he talked back to front” (164).
Handke’s declaration does not negate the experience he creates, yet several scholars of his work are quick to establish the boundaries of it, and point out Kaspar’s strictly metaphorical role. It is certainly not a disabled one, although Kaspar (as fictional character and historical locus of curiosity) would be hard to imagine otherwise. Speaking of Handke’s relatively well-known play and its historical contexts, M. Read suggests:

That Handke, whose work prior to Kaspar had consisted in formalist language games, should find in the legend historical confirmation of his own ideas is not entirely surprising since Kaspar Hauser’s cultural survival as legend depends precisely upon his applicability as proof of whatever preconceived notion one has about the nature of the human mind, language, consciousness, and the relationship between the individual and the natural and social world. (126)

So what preconceived notions might one have about Kaspar’s relationship with the world? Read’s characterizing of and attempts to “correct” disability on stage as “whatever preconceived notion” seem much less specific than his giving credit to Handke (as a playwright who believes Kaspar serves as “a model of people who cannot reconcile themselves with themselves or with their environment, who feel themselves to be isolated” [qtd. in Calandra 64-5]) for keeping Kaspar’s “legend” alive and well. Handke’s insights, with critical support, are both telling and troubling. By reinforcing Kaspar Hauser (mythical or not) as irreconcilable, Handke perpetuates enigmatic perceptions for those who identify as autistic. What does his presentation of disability,
here as a formalist device, reveal beyond clichés of cognitive or physical disorder? Additionally, Handke’s innovations on the page, which often work as call and response columns that contain stage directions, prompters’ directives and Kaspar’s responses, are very much playing with language to expose the absurdities in its construction (even in translation). Stronach and Allan remark that disability and language in Kaspar “set[t] out to provoke thought by breaking conventions that force form to the surface” (31). While part of a language play, Handke’s characters also break normative expectations by not normalizing their behaviour by the play’s close. However, we can also read his play with the materiality of language on the page and the embodied materiality of the actor who will (be made to) speak this language on stage as a comment on how normative identities are made to signify through language.

Again, akin to the metaphorical field around Beckett’s disabled characters, Kaspar is a character who has to show “proof” (Read 126) of his significance to audiences as something meaningful in a larger ableist linguistic, social, metaphysical, philosophical, pedagogical, didactic sensibility. Such layers of “meaning” obscure autistic and/or disabled experience by insisting, even as representation in “Kaspar’s” case, that it always embodies something beyond itself in order to maintain value as cultural material. M. Read keeps his metaphorical bargepole in check, pushing off of any experiential discussions of the play with a startling caveat. He suggests: “one must beware the temptation to read the text as a description of the clinical symptoms of some real person. The play is metaphor; the psychotic, in this play, is a symptom of a cultural malaise and is not a case-study” (131). Once again, disability (now, psychosis – a clinical term) is verboten to be itself. Would such a move be a failure akin to past “wild-child” experiments? What agency do those children possess? M. Read’s defence exposes a double erasure of disability experience – diminished historically and within in its own fictional representations. Why do the perpetual echoes of the modernist condition have to characterize an already disabled figure (whether the above critic agrees, or not) with another metaphorical symptom? And, again, within such figurative layers, what inequities does Kaspar of the text and stage – as an apparently psychotic creature, also able to make us laugh – maintain for those who identify as disabled?

Negotiating a disability theory of value in such apparently “dangerous” critical space is not surprising. What is, however, is that discussion of Handke’s characterization and treatment of Kaspar (which I will explore further in my next section) arrives from the historical records of Kaspar Hauser, which he acknowledges as “a mythical figure, not
just interesting as a simple case-history” (Calandra 64). Further, Read acknowledges Handke “did structure central elements of his play on contemporary records of the historical figure” (126). Again, a rift, or rupture between the figurative-only roles for disability in texts – and their often-undeniable emotional and cultural appeal – and the effaced acknowledgement and experience of disability and its performative importance (rather than its “clinical,” critical dismissal) illustrates how sociotextual inequity works. This deferral of disability as a husk to carry (and shield) normative problems and their often-oppressive repercussions denies the cultural fullness of art. Returning to the ableist imperative of Bell’s ad campaign and how it reinforces the capital revenue behaviour of the company, is Clara Hughes’s role and Bell’s “Let’s Talk” imperative and campaign simply metaphorical too?

“Spit it Out, Just Say something” and Other Violent Forms of Sociocultural Impatience

While giving a beating
it is sensible
not to think of the future
but in the pauses
between punches
it is blissful
to think of the time of order
so that
a too disorderly kick
won’t contribute
during the recommencement of the beating
to channel the thoughts
of the socially sick
when he has adjusted
later on
in the wrong direction (Kaspar 119)

In a special issue of Text and Performance Quarterly that intersects disability studies and performance studies, Henderson and Ostrander consider the connections between disability’s performativity onstage and embodiments of language. They suggest, “If disability, like gender and like sexuality in Judith Butler’s work, is always in the process of becoming, then disability is something we do rather than something we are. What are the ‘speech acts’ (overt or implied) in performing disability?” (1-2). In addition to building upon philosopher J.L. Austin’s originary ideas of speech acts (and
their theory) insofar as “stating is performing an act” (140), I find their imbrications of Butler’s ideas of performativity (articulated earlier in some ways by Goffman) with disability useful because of disability’s various designations and expressions. Does Butler’s statement, “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well” (“Performative” 272), make “doing” disability compelling from the artistic, immersive perspective of an ablebodied actor as it might for a disabled actor who plays a role in non-stereotypical fashion? What is gained (or lost) in similarities between gender, race, or (dis)ability? Does the same “doing of the body” hold true for actors of colour in a contemporary adaptation of a minstrel show? Though “the figurative” is much easier to sell and dismiss for normative consumers than disabled experiences, Butler’s notions of embodiment suggest disability is much more than metaphor. Like other minorities, or embodiments, differences are very important and often shape one’s experience; however, they seldom represent the whole. In other words, our differences indicate and shape our identities but do not define them solely (or stereotypically) and often do resist ableist, racist, sexist, and heteronormative hegemonies at work in various innovative ways.

I begin this section of my discussion with Handke’s prompter’s violent declarations as a very real reminder of the “figurative” role disability plays in a text that draws explicitly upon real, oppressive, hegemonic “speech acts.” Although Austin notes theatrical speech acts, for instance, are unreal,123 they also signify real conditions of existence and practices of normative boundary control. The irony of the passage, though for Kaspar as implied victim, appears with the hope that “disorderly” actions (in this case a “kick”) do not contribute to Kaspar’s maladjustment as a “socially sick” individual heading in the “wrong direction.” Handke’s correction through coercion approach to lessen and erase linguistic and physical disorder in Kaspar ultimately fails. Around the time “His movements are self-assured [and] his mask show[s] a contented expression” he “nicely avoid[s] all objects” en route to a microphone at centre stage (120-1). He is joined, eventually, by five other Kaspars of differing embodiments and performs a language and normative behaviour not his own, which the other Kaspars elicit from him.

123 Discussing Austin’s ideas in “The Concept of the Performative and Its Reality” Jelica Šumič-Riha suggests “reality [is] constituted by the performative itself [and that the] performative utterance can only be an act of authority” (11). Within such logic, then, the prompters’ directives take on a real dimension made possible because of their authoritative role and significance in Handke’s play.
Disability in/as performance helps undo dominant, metaphoric, “speech acts” through the exploration of “the fullness of human experience in all its complications” (Henderson, Ostrander 2) to create spaces for its own declarations on its own terms. As I discuss in chapter two, such acts also raise questions of who has the right to perform what identity.

In bringing together disability and performance studies, Henderson and Ostrander question ideas of successful performance as an “ability to ‘transcend’ (a word that must always be put in scare quotes) ‘body fact’, in Wallace Bacon’s vocabulary, in the service of ‘body act” (2). While Kaspar as text, performance, and as an extended example of a speech act, draws ideas through the accessible practices of others to allow greater interdisciplinarity study, the play seldom appears under the purview of disability studies or theatre. Bacon emphasizes the interpretation of text to change our thoughts. In this respect the spaces of play between Kaspar’s “body fact” and “body act” (102) mean different things for those who are disabled and for those who are not. I wish to keep this designation clear during a closer reading of Handke’s play and some receptions to it – specifically how normative language and behaviour oppress identity for Kaspar, and allow him to “d[o] his body differently than his contemporaries” (Butler 272). Such an act also imbues Handke’s wild-boy-turned-contemporary victim of oppressive language and technology with a late 1960’s revolutionary, counter-culture resonance (akin to the revival of Browning’s Freaks). More importantly, within my theory of disability that attempts to rectify sociotextual inequity – here, in the performative domain – this act fulfills the normalcy of/through language constructed as myth. If language is unable to correct, confine or erase disability, then, certainly, as a significantly defiant speech act, language is thankfully unable to define disability. Though I share an affinity with Sandahl’s uneasy assertion of being “fooled” (“Why Disability Identity Matters” 238) after a compelling performance of Belluso’s Pyretown that features a character who uses a wheelchair played by a non-disabled actor, I also believe the rights of disabled embodiment as performance (as I have discussed) should be upheld and funded similar to other public spaces – which for many people with disabilities, are also spaces of performance.

From a textual perspective, it is also important to note when specific moments of disability embodiment come into play onstage and the normative, corrective and at

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124 For the last several years a team of British researchers have developed a Kaspar-like robot with limited facial expressions to help young autistic children communicate (“Kaspar the Friendly Robot Helps Autistic Kids”).

125 Susan Wendell shares similar experiential reservations of disability on stage.
times, medicalized impulses of the prompters’ responses. Near the chaotic close of the piece, Handke writes: “A third Kaspar appears on stage from the wings, accompanying a fourth Kaspar who walks on crutches, dragging his legs, moving very, very slowly, almost imperceptibly [eventually] both are lurching, as they say, almost ‘unbearably’” (104). From a figurative perspective, the arrival of different Kaspars to the stage offers a contrast to Kaspar (the first’s) changes of embodiment that coincide with his accretion of language, while also reminiscent of his first “awkward” forays of movement (and characterizations) at the beginning of the play. These “new” characters also signify a partial return to a limited-linguistic (and, apparently, physically dependant) self that all the Kaspars celebrate at the play’s end. As a work hyper-attuned to pronouns and the ownership of language and sentences, who is “they” and what do they “say”? Here, Handke’s language, I believe, unwittingly aligns an us/them, observer/disabled embodiment construct that implies a dominant experience of ability and clichéd “unbearable” assumptions of disability and pain for an audience.

To extend such suffering temporally brings with it the notion of lingering on misfortune in addition to what may be a rough attempt at comic relief. Immediately following these stage directions, in the prompter’s column, Handke writes: “After a moment: What you can’t deal with, you can play with” (104-5). As I will discuss shortly, this “playful” notion appears in various performances in differing, often uneasy ways. Again, with such emphasis on language and its multiplicities of instability and confusion, the prompters reveal how disability as a “speech act” holds the play together (and troubles it within the “authority” of language). Following from the wild boy phenomenon, a history of appropriation of, experimentation upon, and extermination of disabled people has particular resonance in Germany and across the Atlantic. The “act” of disavowing/denying a disabled character (the only one using crutches in the text) and his experience in this way, only to build an entire play around him, exposes further inequities of disability’s employment in texts: literally maintained as a plaything upon the stage and (as I discuss previously) kept in figurative check in the critical domain. Such theatrical treatment certainly shares an affinity with eugenics from the perspective of social realism as part of the continual process of valuing some human lives much more than others. Certainly, too, Handke affirms his draw upon – and to – disabled characters in (literary) history, though as far as I know, no one has made the connections explicit. At the close of the play, amidst increasingly shrill sounds, along with the jerking of the final curtain, the collective Kaspars repeat the (in)famous line from Shakespeare’s titular Othello,
“Goats and monkeys,” several times while the curtain collapses on top of all of them (140). As a brief reminder, from an intertextual perspective, Othello’s interjection of the line prior to his suicide reflects his “coming to terms” (rather than going to jail) for/with his murder of Desdemona. Kaspar Hauser’s murder also doubly affirms disability’s troubling link with violence both figuratively and historically for audiences, whether they realize it or not.

Kaspar and Othello, in their figurative, narrative monstering, share a contemporary thread with my idea of “deliberate monstering” for narrative, entertainment or other persuasive purposes – like social panic in the media (around the Luca Magnotta or Adam Lanza cases for example) – of cognitive and other forms of disability. Each textual act articulates palatable, pathological expectations of disability for normative audiences and narratives within/because of a highly problematic corrective impulse. Doing so connects past to present and invites corporations, states and their laws to realize and enforce ablenationalistic aspirations. Susan Schweik’s book, The Ugly Laws, unearths historical and legal oppression of disabled people, culminating in their erasure from social, urban spaces in a multitude of US cities over the late nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. In a chapter on immigration she notes a case associated with New York City’s “crackdown on the padrone system, in which children were taken from Italy as indentured servants to assist Italian street musicians” (Schweik 168). She describes the case against Francesco Nuzzo, who, according to New York’s Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, was responsible for “thirteen-year-old Saverio Felliti [who had] a badly deformed foot and walked with the aid of a crutch.” Schweik continues:

[Felliti] was, therefore, the Society argued, ‘a good card among imported monstrosities, [who were] a perfect bonanza in the begging trade’. The judge who sentenced Nuzzo framed his offenses not so much in the rhetoric of childsaving or antitrafficking as in a discourse that combined ableism, nativism, and classism: ‘it is an object of interest to the community, that the importation of human monstrosities from Italy to this country, for the purpose of mendicancy, should be promptly suppressed’ (Zucchi 129). Saverio Felliti, thirteen-years-old, was an object for this judge, an imported item subject to trade embargo like rancid olive oil. He was also a monster[.] (169)

Schwiek’s research illustrates the historical, ablenationalistic and exploitive economic practices that reinforce inequities for people (citizens or not) with disabilities as sympathetic sites of capital generation (echoing Bell’s “charitable” campaign of “mental

126 He received six months in jail (Schweik 128).
health” awareness in some ways), victims of exploited embodiment and as socially, physically repellent spectacles or “monstrosities.” More importantly, this “rancid” objectification and devaluation of disability – brought about by a judge’s performative speech act – erases Felliti’s personal rights while upholding his exploitive economic value. In similar ways, arguably appropriative/exploitive representations of disability in texts like Kaspar can follow sociohistorical or legal precedent that shapes their interpolation/interpretation in present structures of power. Within moments of social panic and, specifically along lines of perpetual economic crises, disability, too, plays a supporting (again, rather than starring) role, as Schweik suggests “cities turned to ugly law at times when, as far as city leaders were concerned, too many unemployed foreigners packed the streets” (169).

As Sandahl suggests (after discussing Belluso’s Pyretown with him), “Disability is a constant set of negotiations” (“Why Disability Identity Matters” 240). Kaspar, as a play about disability and the perils of its erasure, reflects this process. His perpetual negotiation translates speech acts, imperatives and directives into embodiments to perform a homogenized version of ability. Handke’s important critical commentary in this respect is, in some ways, purposefully lost as a critique of language’s role in maintaining (and bowdlerizing) spectacle. Like a freak show, the spectacle of performing disability renders the sensational and its hyperbolic snares (and associative stares) of language. Whether brought forth in a courtroom, as Felliti’s “badly deformed foot and wal[k] with the aid of a crutch” (Schweik 169), or as Handke introduces his Kaspar to an audience, “deliberate monstering” comes into play as a means to devalue each disabled subject as sentiment or, in Handke’s case, unnerving clown. He writes: “Kaspar (Kasper means clown in German) does not resemble any other comedian; rather, when he comes on stage he resembles Frankenstein’s monster (or King Kong)” (Handke 60). How is the spectacle of Kaspar perceived? In accordance with Garland-Thomson’s salient commentaries upon disability as something to be “stared at” (56), Handke sensationalizes his Kaspar to undeniable, catch-all proportions. Kaspar’s arrival on stage evokes an odd sense of comedy. The patchwork body of Dr. Frankenstein’s monster is not known for its jovial effect upon audiences, and King Kong certainly inscribes more brute power than humour, even as a parenthetical afterthought. Of significance here are, I believe, the violent connections between both of these literary “monsters.” How their representations stick/contribute to “wild boys” and other oppressive histories of disability shares a connection with contemporary uses of autism and/or physical differences or
disabilities in various mediums. Even as a parodic image, Frankenstein’s monster and King Kong were killers in their original fictions – a link to disability, as my exegesis implies, that unfairly stigmatizes those who identify as autistic for example while allowing those who perpetuate such connections to profit in various ways. Handke’s characterization draws upon an audience’s cultural imaginary of monster even as he softens Kaspar’s parameters within a “theatrical” appearance. Handke writes:

[Kaspar wears] a wide brimmed hat [. . .]; a light-coloured shirt with a closed collar; a colourful jacket with many (roughly seven) metal buttons; wide trousers; clumsy shoes; on one shoe for instance, the very long laces have become untied. He looks droll. The colours of his outfit clash with the colours on stage [. . .] His face is a mask; . . . He is the incarnation of astonishment. (63)

Kaspar’s comedic monstering (to build upon my concept) for an assumedly normative audience leaves little room for interpretation beyond “incarnation of astonishment.” His depiction connotes inaccessibility. Not fitting in (in a normative sense) within his physical environment, as my earlier discussion of his movements also highlights, invites and motivates a normative, overcoming-disability model of narrative along his corrective journey. This awkward manifestation of disability also becomes an anticipatory spectator sport. Handke writes, “as the audience has feared all along, [Kaspar] finally falls to the ground” (64). Handke’s desire for or assumption of a fearful response from “the audience” in relation to Kaspar’s physicality is perhaps easier to elicit given Kaspar’s obscured identity. Curiously, his face “is a mask,” or in other words a key component of his identity is – like other images shown above of “Kaspar,” past and present – effaced. Its clown-ish substitution, Knapp remarks, “draw[s] guffaws [and] is viewed as a joyful and ebullient creature. Beneath the mask, however, is a diametrically opposed being: a sorrowful, pained, and victimized individual” (241). Though some productions use an opaque mask to project tensions of identity, the device also hides or deflects disability and obscures Kaspar’s identity. Knapp’s binaristic take on Kaspar’s mask limits his dimensionality and audience reaction. Either he is funny or sad. Whether or not Handke wishes to portray Kaspar, within the spectacle of a clown, as either externally happy or internally sad, Knapp’s third-person, spoken-for-perceptions of the character’s treatment, again, build upon either/or clichés of marginalized, dehumanizing embodiment and leave little room for interpretation beyond sympathy or humour.

127 In an ablenationalistic moment of capital subsuming disability, according to BBC News, a German software company is actively recruiting autistic workers for their exceptional data skills (“SAP in Autism Recruitment Drive”). Presumably, not all people with autism need apply. The actions of the company, however, illustrate the neoliberal commodification of disabilities.
From a performative perspective, however, a character in stasis can be uninteresting, so Kaspar eventually brings himself to sit in "something like a disorderly lotus-position" (65). The play’s physical and linguistic corrective narrative then becomes a vehicle to ruminate upon and expand his nearly mythical solitary sentence: “I want to be someone like somebody else was once.” For Kaspar, this sentence is as problematic as it is promising, by insisting upon ableist-assumptive relationships of Kaspar to himself and of language to things – all the while negating his identity prior to sharing that sentence with an audience. Sandahl and Auslander hint at the instability of embodiment and under-theorized performativity of disability identity, suggesting “the notion that disability, too, is performed (like gender, sex, sexuality, race, and ethnicity) and not a static ‘fact’ of the body is not widely acknowledged or theorized” (2). How, then, does Kaspar perform his disability? From the constructs of Handke’s play, with its various forms of aural and visual boundary control, on the surface at least Kaspar’s experience epitomizes objectification and a literal (with a blinking eye above the stage with numerous amplified prompters present throughout much of the play) top-down model of sociolinguistic control.

Within this dominant model of communicatory space I wish to consider the experiential model of disability for a moment. In “Dancing Autism” Petra Kuppers notes several people “living with the diagnosis [who] write and speak about the lack of fit between popular rhetoric surrounding autism and the experience of it, and about the negative effects that crude or narrow definitions of ‘emotion’ have for people who live life differently [and the texts’ that] feed on the strange conundrum that (stereotypes of) autistic people as savants, gifted yet locked away [etc..] pose to representation” (192). In order to briefly test Sandahl and Auslander’s claim with respect to Kuppers’ observations (especially in consideration of Knapp and others’ static designations for Kaspar’s emotional range or figurative [non-experiential] limitations), considering an autistic perspective in order to dimensionalize its textual representation offers ways to reconsider the limitations of (normative, ableist) boundaries of embodiment ascribed from without. Kuppers also shares the autistic perspective of Eric Chen, who in his book Mirror Mind revisits some calculative moments of Mark Haddon’s The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime. Akin to Handke’s prompters’ excessive repetitious treatment of Kaspar, Chen notes, “an autistic has to struggle to understand human speech, especially the context behind every word. The smooth flow of thoughts and the apparent ease of understanding human speech are highly unrealistic experiences” (qtd. in Kuppers 195).
So, the seemingly exaggerative details\footnote{Kuppers' article shares Chen's rewrites of Haddon's "novel's way of normalizing [the protagonist] Christopher," (194) including his math skills. Haddon notes Christopher's calculations and arrival at correct answers with very familiar, dominant logic. For example, "you just multiply 864 X 100 which is 86400. Then you divide it by 4 [etc.]" Chen counters this apparent familiarity to suggest an autistic experience might involve different figurations. He writes, "As Christopher heard [the math question], in his mind appeared two green shapes that looked a lot like uneven cubes. The shapes clashed into each other and rippled with lots of tiny cubes, squares and triangles. Eventually a new shape was formed. Christopher replied: '216,864'" (195). Chen's experiential narrative illustrates the value of different systems of comprehension.} and excesses of information delivery that Handke provides actually destabilize the safety of the figurative domain of Kaspar criticism. Chen's comments on understanding spoken language via his autistic experience bring new considerations to Handke's antagonistic theatrical mechanics. Disability is not simply a feature of Kaspar; rather, it motivates the narrative and imbues its action with tension towards an uneasy reform. Handke writes:

To formalize this torture it is suggested that a kind of magic eye [resides] above the [stage]. This eye [. . .] indicates by blinking, the degree of vehemence with which the PROTAGONIST is addressed. The more vehemently he defends himself, the more vehemently he is addressed, the more vehemently the magic eye blinks. (Or one might employ a jerking indicator of the kind used on scales for tests of strength in amusement parks.) Although the sense of what the voices addressing the protagonist say should always be completely comprehensible, their manner of speaking should be that of voices which in reality have a technical medium interposed between themselves and the listeners: telephone voices, radio or television announcers' voices, [. . .] of stadium announcers, of narrators in the more endearing cartoons, of announcers of train arrivals and departures, of interviewers, of gym teachers who by the way they speak make their directions correspond to the sequence of the gymnastic movements, of language course records, of policemen as they speak through megaphones at demonstrations, etc., etc. (59)

Like Kaspar, and his single sentence, the prompters, or "einsagers," “speak without undertones or overtones; that is; they speak neither with the usual irony, humour, helpfulness, human warmth, nor with the usual ominousness, dread, incorporeality, or supernaturalness – they speak comprehensibly. Over a good amplifying system they speak a text that is not theirs” (66). Like Kaspar, the agents of correctivity above also appropriate someone else's identity. Within the constructs of compulsory ableism, that “other” of desire is able and uniform. Handke's directives contextualize societal conformity during an era of significant protests upon Kaspar for the audience via “tests of strength,” the shouts of “gym teachers” and their desired “sequence[d] gymnastic movements” and, as a reminder of hegemony on the ground, protest-controlling actions of police.
The play's very ability-driven directives enforce a specific type of order, while also maintaining Kaspar as a spectacle of disability. Under the watch of the “magic eye,” language must follow. The deliberate interposition of a technical medium between the sound or expression of language and its listeners can make its apprehension seem clinical, and, provide, from Chen’s perspective of autism for example, confusing emotional contexts. Language becomes a stethoscopic event – as an instrument designed to prod and poke at a distance to search out and correct disorder through aggressive implementation and control. Handke writes of Kaspar’s sentence:

You have a sentence to bring order into every disorder: with which you can designate every disorder in comparison to another disorder as a comparative order; with which you can declare every disorder an order: can bring yourself into order; with which you can talk away every disorder. You have a sentence you can take as a model. You have a sentence you can place between yourself and everything else. You are the lucky owner of a sentence which will make every impossible order possible for you and make every possible and real disorder impossible for you: which will exorcize every disorder from you. (63)

Language, however, is a problematic tool to make “illness” emerge via the gaze. A thread of wild boy, “enlightened” religiosity does appear when Kaspar’s sentence becomes a means to correct and “exorcize” his disorder and disability, in Berger’s terms, after his “transgression” or fall from a presumptive innocence of language and behaviour. During the prompters’ spiel of correctives, Kaspar manages to “tip [a rocking chair] over,” as a concrete, physical purging of “disorder.”

129 In *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault elaborates upon connections between language, illness and types of gazes that contextualize disease and disorder upon the “visible body” (3) which “enables one to see and to say” (xii). He includes the “positive gaze” (xii), “empirical gaze” (xiii), “patient gaze” (xv), “medical gaze” (9), “qualitative gaze” (13), “penetrating gaze” (15), “a gaze [which is] diacritical” (23), a “superficial gaze” (29), “intersecting gazes” (31), “the gaze of compassion” (40), “a purified purifying gaze” (51-2), a “Childhood-Gaze” (65), a “sovereign... gaze” (89), a “happy gaze” (105), an “observing gaze” (107), a “clinical gaze” (108), “a hearing gaze and a speaking gaze. . .balanc[ing] between speech and spectacle” (115), a “searching gaze” (125), a “neutral gaze” (126), a “surface gaze” (129), an “anatomo-clinical gaze” (146), “a gaze that touches” (164), an “integrating gaze” (165), and a “rather dilated gaze” (171). Akin to the roles of the magic eye and prompters in Handke’s play, Foucault cautions against “the great myth of a pure Gaze that would be pure Language: a speaking eye . . . teaching those who do not know and have not seen. This speaking eye would be the servant of things and the master of truth” (114-115). Foucault’s exhaustive analysis advocates a symbiotic relationship between disease, the gaze, and language – culminating in an ideal “brightness” and “purity of an unprejudiced gaze” (195).

130 He also cites incidents where a patient’s gender, physicality, and in some cases lack of hygiene “forbade” a doctor to place his ear directly upon the body. Hence, the stethoscope creates and signifies a “moral distance” and a “distance of shame” between doctor and patient (*The Birth of the Clinic* 163-4). The mechanisms of Handke’s play allow the audience to “listen” to Kaspar in an analogous fashion.
The possibilities of the/his sentence become concrete too. Through vigorous repetition, “the sentence” induces order both as a construct of protection from violence and deviancy and as a disturbing linguistic source of normalizing power. The prompters imply disorder is fixable with language, and that language offers a mandatory cure-all for that which is not orderly – similar to socioeconomic and cultural imperatives of compulsory ablebodiedness that shape disability into more manageable forms and spaces. The subsequent linguistic constraints/constructions Kaspar endures hyperbolize how the presence of a disabled, or in normative terms, “deviant,” potentially violent body in a staged narrative, for example, often “deforms subjectivity [that may] “violently erup[t] on the surface of its bodily container” (Mitchell, Snyder 58). As Kaspar repeats his sentence “over and over,” he eventually imbues it with “almost every possible kind of expression,” including a scream (Handke 65). Although he is able to illustrate a tonal range of emotion with his words, Kaspar’s lack of recognition forces Kaspar to interact with the inanimate objects (a couch, table and chairs, wardrobe, etc.) that surround him. As he begins to walk again, Handke writes, “He directs his sentence [. . .] at a chair. . . . [then] at a wardrobe, expressing with it that the wardrobe does not hear him” (59). His apparent frustrations toward these new-found objects and their lack of response lead him to “kic[k] the wardrobe,” after which he responds: “I want to be someone like somebody else was once” (60). By directing his own words towards concrete objects, Kaspar initializes a process of self-recognition, or indeed, subjectivity of self through language. The sentence operates between two temporal, grammatical positions: “I want to be” (definitive future) “like somebody else was once” (uncertain past), and thrives in the imaginary. Kaspar’s visceral disapproval of the non-recognition of his words (within an ableist framework) suggests he also thrives in the imaginary. Commenting upon the uncertainty of controlling a body through language, Mitchell and Snyder suggest:

The relation between a body and the language used to describe it is unstable, an alien alliance: materiality is not language, and language cannot be material, although each strives to conform to the terms of the other. We engage our bodies in efforts to make their stubborn materiality “fit” ideals. Likewise, words give us the illusion of a fix upon the material world that they cannot deliver. (Narrative Prosthesis 7)

To borrow from Jacques Lacan, “it is only in the moment of entry into the symbolic order of language that [a character’s] full subjectivity comes into being” (qtd. in Modern Literary Theory 123).
The play’s partial textual balance between prompters and subject coincides with the directive that Kaspar’s “resistance” is less successful, and allows the prompters to “continu[ally] stuff him with enervating words” and “need[le] him into speaking” (Handke 70). The act of speech, or performative “speech act” – theatrical or not – acts as a corrective, invasive tool that attempts to fix what it cannot contain. This articulation also, I believe, is consistent with the failure of language (and many of its representations), from the enlightenment model to present usages, to remove disability’s “stubborn materiality” or replace/erase its “simplistic” language and behaviour with dominant ones.

Following the corrective logic of the play, Kaspar remains within the margins of disorder until he acquires language to assert his/an identity – a salvation from the “horror” (Handke 72) of his linguistic capacity. Again, through repetition (and pedagogical critique), Kaspar’s original sentence morphs to challenge processes of language acquisition, in opposition to the prompters’ words:

- He resists more vehemently,
- but even less successfully:
- Where are you sitting? You are sitting quietly. What are you speaking? You are speaking slowly.
- Waswant!
- Some!ike!
- Someone!
- What are you breathing? You are breathing regularly. (73)

In the context of Kaspar’s narrative, the role of the prompters is to shape his “stubborn materiality” (Mitchell, Snyder 7) to fit into their normative speech act – as though unperforming disability. Just as disability is an unstable ontology, so too are attempts to undo it. Tensions between Kaspar’s shouts amidst phrases asserting his calm embodiment reflect the unease of his delivery into the symbolic order of language that anchors him to the material of his environment.

Kaspar’s aural and visual oppression through a multitude of mediated texts and visual disruptions certainly challenges audiences’/critics’ expectations of what a performance can entail. In addition to my upcoming discussion of Kaspar’s performances that arrive from reviews, I want to offer a brief caveat that my analysis of online video excerpts provides an opportunity (though limited) to illustrate and critique, some aspects of the wide-ranging productions of Handke’s work. Even as Stacey Christodoulou, director of The Other Theatre’s 1997 Montréal performance of Kaspar as a puppet show calls the play “the Hamlet of the avant-garde” (qtd. in Coutts C11) because of its frequent performances, it seldom receives Hamlet-like praise. More importantly, her staging choice of Kaspar as puppet maintains the erasure of the materiality of the disabled body on and off stage, and brings additional consideration to
Handke’s phrase “What you can’t deal with, you can play with” (104-5). Though I have not experienced a live performance of Kaspar, what I glean from several brief segments of various productions online is how the notions of “play” appear in differing, often uneasy ways. A 2011 Brown University Theatre production directed by Ioana Jucan intersperses Kaspar’s sixteen phases or sections of the play with short videos that contempiorize his experiences. A section she terms the “The Protest,” for example, overlays a forlorn young man amidst footage of street protests taken from RT Network. That he physically responds to the violent images around him by bouncing off of and trying to avoid them is analogous to Kaspar’s eventual violent responses to often-unintelligible connections between language and the objects around him. Another recent performance by the Austrian company Schauspielhaus Graz updates the interchanges between Kaspar and the prompters by presenting him in white face make-up, retro-suit, suspenders, hat, Doc Martens, and playing an electric guitar while singing/speaking a range of dissonant songs. Wrocławski Teatr Współczesny (Warsaw Modern Theatre’s) 2009 production shows a Kaspar in dress clothes writing his name on the stage floor repeatedly while prompters inundate him with random phrases and imperatives. Interestingly, this Kaspar later attempts to pick up and eat the later-obsurred chalk letters ground into his slacks as though a physical reminder of language’s immateriality and inability to correct difference (and ability to maintain it).


The children, who range in age from nine to 14, have different degrees of disabilities. Some are physically disabled, some are mentally disabled and others have a combination of both physical and mental disabilities. Novak explained that he met the students at the Rosseger School when he visited to teach a theater workshop two years ago. He noticed that many of the students were in a situation analogous to Kaspar’s.

While the director’s intentions seem promising from a disability theatre perspective – in terms of having disabled actors play roles in stories of disability—the article makes no mention of whether the actor who plays Kaspar is also disabled, or what kinds of roles his “classmates” play. Novak says of his troupe: “They have their own language of their eyes and gestures[.] They live in their own world [and t]his was the problem of Kaspar.”
He continues: “It is so rare to see not just children, but disabled children as actors[]. It is never seen in the U.S. The play should make (the children) think about theater differently, their disability differently, and their world differently, and that’s good.” Novak’s third-person assessments of disabled experience, though well intentioned, also maintain stereotypical limits for “them” on stage and off. Though I am unable to comment on the performance, bringing together presumably normative audiences and young actors with disabilities invites empowering ways to rectify performative inequities of disability.

Do Kaspar’s extra-contextual necessities, when read as reflective of understandings of autistic language experiences (as Chen reminds us), explain an unfavorable review of a 2011 London performance of Kaspar directed/acted by Ryan Kiggell? Reviewer Skye Corewijn thinks the play “a tad brutal,” and describes Kaspar’s single sentence as “repeated, loudly, and in every possible punctuated manner.” She continues: “after approximately ten minutes of this aural attack I begin to fear [Kiggell will] never stop. Awkward fumbling around the stage follows and two dull narrators rev their engines – this is the beginning of a rather challenging 90 minutes.” Her frustrations lie in the play’s lack of traditional narrative (though it certainly complicates a traditional corrective narrative of disability) as she, on behalf of all in attendance, suggests, “audiences yearn for more story and development when there is none [and] either there are no emotive dealings whatsoever or we’re presented with far too much – howling, buzzing, scratching and shrieking.” Predictably, and more safely perhaps, Corewijn defines her experience uniquely in terms of ability, as being “half-exhausted by the mental triathlon [she’s] just undertaken[]” Kaspar is brutally postmodern and tiresome to sit through. To be honest, I’d rather settle down with the play on paper than see it unfold on stage” (“Kaspar at Arch” 6). To be fair, Kiggell’s performance may not have been an aesthetic or critical success; however, several other critics share Corewijn’s unease, even as Handke’s (and those who perform his work) artistic interpretation of speaking and language practices call out what many of us take for granted.

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132 Linda Eisenstein refers to a 1994 performance of Kaspar in Oberlin, Ohio as a form of “syntactical gymnastics” (“You Are The Lucky Owner of a Sentence”).
An array of promotional images for various performances of Kaspar direct viewers to contemplate a faceless, stylized, awkward victim. From left to right: A recent Kaspar behind a white mask helps reinforce a ghostly presence and that he lacks a real identity. Similarly, the shaping of text as skin suggests Kaspar embodies a one-dimensional identity that consists solely of words. Next, Kaspar looks perilous on stage. A sense of uneasiness during his performance is also reinforced by his semi-comedic, clownish costume. Finally, a 1986 production from Luxembourg’s Kasematten Theatre avoids representing Kaspar’s face altogether to characterize him as a trembling, cartoon-like, pigeon-toed victim of violence unable to tie his own shoes. Each image, then, helps to diminish expectations of Kaspar even before the curtain rises.

Reviews of different productions over time are more favorable, embracing the play’s innovations. For example, William Triplett describes a 1996 Washington performance by Dan Awkward as “not so much a play as a thesis being acted out.” He also notes that “It is Awkward’s, well, awkward performance that allows the piece to slip its academic moorings [. . .] Awkward is a big man, and his every ungainly attempt just to walk underscores his desperate pleas to be somebody.” With troubling notions of how (an) identity through performing of certain kinds of ability is valued (after all how can a “big man” be somebody if he can’t even “just” walk?), Triplett does praise, within “Handke’s didactic stage directions [the] human being struggling to get out” (B8). Rita Stein’s 1973 review of the “often cruelly comic” event suggests it is as much visual and aural as intellectual. She notes the exceptional performance of Christopher Lloyd (who played at Brooklyn’s Chelsea Theatre) “in a transparent mask that gives his face a waxy clownish quality while still allowing the human expression to be visible[. He] portrays with impeccable skill the loosening of body tongue and mind.” She discusses the play’s technical mediations in ominous ways, suggesting “The [director’s use of] video is not merely a concession to the multi-media fad, but a compelling visible metaphor of Kaspar’s image-laden brain and, of course, of modern society, brainwashed by slogans and rhetoric disseminated by the omnipresent and enslaving tube.” She also notes the connectivity of monstering and violence that Handke’s text makes explicit, where a “bank
of television screens . . . show[s] live pictures of the play and replays of earlier scenes, Godzilla and King Kong destroy Tokyo. The beasts are again in charge” (372). With less of an endorsement, another 1973 review by Seymour Rudin “found the pattern of images and sounds intolerably repetitive” to favour a “much more imaginative and moving Open Theatre’s use of the Kaspar Hauser figure in its Mutations! But Kaspar was done with dedication and skill despite my evident allergy to Handke” (878). From my research of such a widely performed play, only Coutts (and Hunter’s discussion of Novak’s interpretation, of course) discusses Kaspar in connection to experiences of disability to suggest, “The production tells us we are all victims of miscommunication. We can think of those afflicted by stroke, Alzheimer’s, autism” (C11). Though her phrasing undoes her inclusive intent, insofar as “we” are not all victims of miscommunication, and certainly not in the same ways as a third-person “those” might presume, her gesture does, at the very least, hint at the play’s importance to understanding and critiquing alternate embodiments and experiences with language.

Disability theorist/literary critic Sanjeev Kumor Uprety offers a discussion of the Lacanian notion that once someone comprehends identity as an “I,” through a name, there exists an immediate fading away of the self through language, which language is unable to replace:

This sense of lack leads to the birth of desire and then to a continuous movement through which the subject seeks to fulfill the lack by taking up an infinite chain of signifiers, that is, by making a series of metaphoric and metonymic substitutions to move from one signifier to another. But the sense of lack does not find its fulfillment in any particular signifier, hence the continuous slide along the chain of signifiers. Language thus “chains” the human subject, capturing it irrevocably within the prisonhouse of language. (370)

As Uprety suggests, the lack associated with discovering (and trying to maintain) a sense of selfhood encompasses a perpetual search for language the self can attach to reflection in a constant slippage of signification. The same “metaphoric and metonymic” process often occurs with the sociocultural and historical roles of disability in society – often understood in unattainable ways, etc. As Mitchell and Snyder point out, words “cannot deliver” (Narrative Prosthesis 7) so metaphors substitute for each other while shaping identity, in a sense, forming a “prisonhouse” of normative representation and control. The sentence, as a speech act, then, embodies a linguistic struggle for stability within unstable identity. Kaspar, who “no longer understand[s] anything literally” (Handke 138), and his awareness of self through speech illustrates (t)his conundrum:

Ever since I can speak I can stand up in an orderly manner; but falling only hurts
ever since I can speak; but the pain when I fall is half as bad ever since I know I
can speak about the pain; . . . but the pain never stops at all any more ever since
I know that I can feel ashamed of falling. (139)

The at-times violent characterizations of disability in Handke’s work and at large
culturally, enact language’s non-functional status and/or inability to contain what it seeks
to control – yet it still does. If negation is a linguistic rule, in what ways can it slip? If we
learn and think through metaphors, then our job is to change our thinking to
accommodate ones that do not negate – as my next play under discussion will show.
Disability can perform its language and actions in ways that disrupt, or short-circuit (as
Quayson might suggest) our narrative expectations of normative behaviour in equally
challenging, but more equitable ways.

Rolling beyond Metaphor: What’s so special about being
Correct(ed) Anyway?

“This plan will work out fine,” Eileen tells the others, “as long as we all possess the will to
walk toward the things we desire and away from the things we pity.” (a group of parents’
deciding to abandon their disabled children – from John Belluso’s A Nervous Smile)

I’ve got a bike, you can ride it if you like
It’s got a basket, a bell that rings
And things to make it look good (Syd Barrett, “Bike” by Pink Floyd – played at the
beginning of Belluso’s Voice Properties)

The corrective drive (and failure) of Handke’s Kaspar’s “enlightenment” is shared
with Kaspars of numerous historical fictions: in Werner Herzog’s 1974’s Enigma of
Kaspar Hauser (Every Man for Himself and God against All), for example, Kaspar is
murdered after his transformative “education” as his historical record indicates. Even
critiques of such systems perform and reinforce models of social control. Control of our
bodies (and their various languages and expressions) is not an absolute. The wild child
phenomenon I touch upon, up to its postmodern echoes, brings a history of “speech and
body acts” that define/idealize/resist embodiment. The failure of narratives and practices
of corrective ideologies (in their perpetual continuity) and the bodies-as-metaphors that
often follow seldom reflect the ever-growing and changing multitude of disabilities. As
Schweik reminds us, disability is not “monolithic” (21), so why are its metaphors,

133 In their text Embodied Rhetorics, James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson refer to such
a process in terms of disability education, as “utility over self-expression” (16), like the “teachings”
of Bell, for example.
aesthetics and emotional options? Though I explore challenges to this construct more significantly in chapter four, the one-crip-fits-all approach suits the morality-for-the-market benevolence of corporations, charities and telethons, etc., but deliberately forgets questions of disabled experience apart from extremes, like Kaspar (or Clara Hughes). Within such oblivious, colonizing logic, then, language acquisition, communication, its mediums and our impulses to/for talk, also become uniform – again, assuming we can, or choose to.

The ability of disability’s performativity challenges expectations of normative embodiment and marks its own social history\textsuperscript{134} as an act. John Belluso’s brief one-act play, \textit{Voice Properties (On a First Date after a Full Year of Februaries)} (2001), avoids corrective discussions altogether. As my discussions have shown, corrective impulses play a role in maintaining sociotextual inequities between disability and the uptake of its performances. Coutts’ observation in the \textit{Montreal Gazette} about Kaspar, that “we” are “all victims of miscommunication,” attempts to universalize experiences of disability when she relates such victimization to “stroke, autism, Alzheimer’s.” Doing so, however, reinforces a problematic “we” that discounts those with disabilities by suggesting all of us are misunderstood victims in some way. Though disability will most certainly be a part of our lives, we “know” it through a very limited frame of representation that seldom reflects disabled experience. Belluso’s play shifts sites of identity onstage to allow for new communication and a more nuanced understanding to occur – after all, how many of “us” know what a VOCA is? His work allows reconsideration of the relationships between (and how) speech and body acts, and for whom.

Belluso’s \textit{Voice Properties} undoes the polarization of disability (as dying or genius or victim or amazing supercrip) that so often arrives with its presence (think of Knapp’s assumptions of Kaspar as clown, for example). The play is significant because of its unremarkability as a story/play of disabled experience. It is a conversation between two lonely adults who meet at a bar. It is about tone, voice and unsettling normative expectations. What makes it remarkable for audiences is that it demystifies the mysterious technology that a “handsome man” (Belluso 371) who has cerebral palsy uses everyday, and the assumptions of experience and behaviour that go with it. It’s also

\textsuperscript{134} Disability Theatre appears in Canada in the mid-1980s (Johnston 15). Johnston also provides important (early) Canadian disability theatre context around David Freeman (a playwright with cerebral palsy) and his successful play \textit{Creeps} (1965). It emerges out of his own experiences at a “sheltered workshop” in Toronto where he “sanded blocks, folded boxes, and separated nuts and bolts” (qtd. in Johnston 171).
Voice Properties elevates the mundane by negotiating complexities of disability during an at-times awkward but quite humorous social process of a first date, while also showing how disability performs onstage and how it shapes our bodies, behaviours and compromises in surprising – non-metaphorical – ways.

Kathleen Tolan’s “We are not a Metaphor: A Conversation about Representation” provides a remarkable conversation with several disability/disabled playwrights, including Belluso, Cheryl Marie Wade, Lynn Manning, among others, along with theorist Carrie Sandahl. The participants cover a range of issues in disability theatre, including lack of physical access to the stage for disabled actors and venues for audiences (beyond the legal minimum), funding performances, teaching students, and how inclusion of disability performance can bring new stories to new audiences. They also agree upon the problematic relationship of metaphor to representations/presentations of disability – especially as Wade suggests, “simplistic and narrow views” of disability (20).

Further, as Sandahl notes, one of the problems with non-disabled actors playing disability is that “it’s very easy to separate the metaphor from the person, because there is always some sort of distance, the signal that ‘I’m not really disabled’ always seems to leak through” (21) – though not always, as she reveals earlier in this chapter. Belluso concurs, comparing the difference between actors as “night and day” and as a form of “social history” erasure. He continues: “When you have a non-disabled actor playing the role, the curtain goes up at the end, the lights come up, it’s time for the curtain call [and] the actor will stand up out of the wheelchair and take a bow, and suddenly everything that has come before has just been erased. The audience is let off the hook” (21).

Ironically, Belluso’s pointed metaphor (within a discussion of negating metaphors and their attachment to people) helps invert a dominant representational formula in entertainment.

The hook (that Kaspar’s prompters reveal in relation to his and his replicas’ uneasy embodiment, “play with what you don’t understand,” for example) is that audiences, generally speaking (as I discuss in chapter two), anticipate a return to normative embodiment by narrative’s end. When that does not happen, audiences and their expectations change. Adding to my previous chapter’s discussion around the tensions of economic opportunities lost for disabled actors to their ablebodied counterparts, Belluso does well to dispel mythical, but culturally enforced, perceptions of disability as a pleasure-less, perpetually sorrowful existence – something that the
experiential model of disability undoes. He says, “Because this experience of disability is seen as the antithesis of pleasure, we are seen as having damaged pleasure systems, when nothing could be further from the truth” (21).

Voice Properties, which first (and, I believe, has so far only) appeared at the 2002 Humana Festival\textsuperscript{135} in Louisville, Kentucky as part of a collection of plays under the designation ‘The Technology Project’, offers a space (akin to Belluso’s bus journey) to perform disability “in explicitly self-conscious and theatrical terms” (Sandahl, Auslander 2), shifting from metaphorical identity to actual experience – and from expectation to surprise for audiences. Belluso’s play features Barney (Bryan Buckler), who uses a motorized wheelchair and a VOCA – or as he informs his ablebodied date Yolanda (Yo) (Emiera Felice Krauss/Jen Taher), “A Voice Output Communication Aid” (373)—to communicate with others. She’s a middle-aged, librarian divorcée who answers his personal ad on the Internet and agrees to meet in a bar over a few glasses of red wine that “Barney sips . . . through a straw” (372) – where the scene begins. The scenario alone already undoes multiple stereotypical expectations of disabled (and normative) experiences insofar as people like Barney do go on, for lack of a better expression, blind dates, and people like Yo do have a good time in the company of disability.

The play is also a vehicle for considerable humour\textsuperscript{136} and levity – in unexpected ways – from the perspective of able audiences at least. The only review of the play that I could locate, “Technology in fest spotlight, but human insights prevail,” notes:

a handicapped man speaks to his date with the help of a Voice Output Communication Aid, like the one Stephen Hawking uses. The woman is at first dismayed by the robot-like sound, but gradually adjusts – it’s not there to curb expression, but to free it. Still, a voice aid and a wheelchair don’t make the man – “he’s there for her to find behind the technology.” (\textit{Christian Science Monitor})

While not a typical source for mentions of disability theatre or a particularly innovative take on Belluso’s work (though the unattributed quotes are interesting and give the anonymous observations a paratextual feel), the review’s heteronormative impulses are recognizable. As my brief close reading will illustrate, Barney seldom aspires to be “the

\textsuperscript{135} Humana, according to its website, “ranks fourth among all U.S. health insurers based on revenue.” Akin to Bell’s funding of “mental health initiatives,” is corporate sponsorship and sublimation of national health simply an inevitable “moral” reality of neoliberalism?

\textsuperscript{136} Like Belluso’s work, Johnston notes that Calgary’s Inside Out mixed-ability theatre company often employs humour “to connect with audiences in generative ways [and] to make audiences think but not [as founding artistic director Ruth Bieber mentions] ‘leave them feeling guilt ridden, oppressed and bewildered’” (33) – counter to many experiences of Handke’s play that I have encountered.
man.” Similarly, as my first two chapters suggest, Murphy and Finn, respectively, actively avoid such constructs. Though a subtext of sexual interest and flirting that leads to a proposition on Yo’s part (again, counter to dominant narrative constructions, especially of “the man”), the play also avoids any suggestion of heterosexuality as a corrective for disability (as Kim elaborates upon in my previous chapters), or that Barney might not be sexually active.

More importantly, as a means to counter the “cruelly comic” (Stein) impressions of Kaspar – due to its medicalized, depersonalized information delivery to Kaspar and audience alike—Belluso’s play has audience members wear headphones (as a medium of greater attention and intimacy). Belluso writes:

> He types words into his VOCA; as he presses “enter” we hear the synthesized voice through the speaker system. When Yo responds to him we hear her voice through the speaker system as well; onstage she gesticulates as if she is talking, but her lips do not move. (372)

Here, technology bridges and reflects inequities of access to communication. Except for a difference in the VOCA’s tonality, Yo and Barney’s communication, as the audience hears it, then, is relatively balanced. Onstage, however, normative assumptions of how to communicate disappear – with one character using body language and another typing upon a small keyboard. This ontological shift becomes more significant when the imaginary of what Barney’s voice sounds like – in addition to his computer-mediated voice with little affect – is revealed at the close of the play with the encouragement of Yo’s fairly ribald, cliché joke. Belluso writes:

> (Barney laughs out loud; it is the first live sound we hear in the play. A quiet moment between them. Yo speaks in her live voice.)

YO: You have a great laugh.
BARNEY: (Speaking, smiling.) Thaa-nk… Yoou… (376)

All the communication in the play has been mediated, except for the play’s last line, in which we hear Barney’s actual laugh without his typing into the VOCA. Ending the play at this point in their new relationship suggests an openness to understand without adaptive technologies, and that the human voice is always already a technology.

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137 Belluso writes, “Three Boy Scouts, a lawyer, a priest, and a pilot are in a plane that is about to crash. The pilot says, ‘Well, we only have three parachutes, let’s give them to the three Boy Scouts. They’re young and have their whole lives in front of them’. The lawyer says, ‘Fuck the Boy Scouts!’ The priest says, ‘Good idea, but do we have time for that?’” (376). The placement of the joke, which works via stereotypes, helps reveal the inaccuracy and absurdity of stereotypes of disability that are often culturally acceptable because they are “just” jokes.
A few moments of dialogue from the play help to illustrate disabled experience and seldom-discussed perspectives about that experience. Early on, Yo expresses her reservations about their encounter, perhaps brought on by her inability to understand Barney fully. She says, “I’m going to be honest, I’m a little nervous, not only because I’ve never been on a date with a guy in a wheelchair, a guy in a wheelchair who uses one of those Stephen Hawking-type things to speak.” After Yo acknowledges the “poetic” title of Barney’s ad – “Seeking a Warm Evening After a Full Year of Februarys” (372) – and what that might imply, narratively speaking, Belluso forces a coming-to-terms with embodiment for each character:

YO: Can you talk at all? The robot voice is kind of freaking me out.
(Beat.)
BARNEY: I have difficulty speaking because of my cerebral palsy. I mentioned this to you in our last exchange of e-mails. If you were not comfortable with this fact then you should not have agreed to meet me here.
YO: Okay, no need to be nasty.
BARNEY: I wasn’t being nasty.

The beat prior to Barney’s reveal helps to alleviate any tension around what his “difficulty” might be. Fully disclosing his embodiment puts the onus of continuing the dialogue onto Yo, who, perhaps surprised by Barney’s assertion of the “facts,” stalls for time by hinting at the embittered disabled character trope, which he immediately shuts down.

Belluso renders metaphor unnecessary or at the very least employs it in different ways\(^\text{138}\) that avoid predictable models of disability performance or representation – that do not let the audience “off the hook” in other words. For example, Yo likens the problems she has with the VOCA’s expressionless tonality to her robotic ex-husband, rather than to Barney directly, which has the effect of shared experience that brings them closer together and piques her curiosity:

YO: I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic or not, the property of your voice, the character, is that what it’s called? The tone, or emotion is removed. But, my ex-husband didn’t have much emotion in his voice either and I, well, kind of got used to that. He wasn’t completely a robot, but, well, close … But anyway; you could, couldn’t you just say a few words out loud…?
(Barney interrupts using his VOCA)
BARNEY: Why do you sign your e-mails with the name Yo? (373)

\(^\text{138}\) Derek Walcott suggests the “process of renaming, of finding new metaphors” (“Nobel Lecture”) requires work. Though speaking of postcolonial subjectivity, he reminds us that representations tiring under fear, lack and weakness gain agency when resisting dominant ideologies – something that Belluso’s plays do for representations and understandings of disability.
Barney’s change of subject manages to shift questions of identity on to the asker of the questions, while also illustrating that his mode of communication is not passive. She indicates her moniker is a nickname for friends she “do[esn]’t have,” which, ironically, is another commonality they share. Conversely, Yo immediately aligns his mode of travel with a worse depression than hers:

YO: . . . I’m sure it’s worse for you. It must be really hard, you have to drag all that stuff around with you; the chair and the “Voice Operated Communicator-thing.” I just mean, it sounds, depressing.
BARNEY: But I’m not depressed. Not anymore. Not always. Only sometimes. But I posted the personal ad on the internet because I was tired of feeling alone. *(Indicating the VOCA and the wheelchair.)* And these things, they’re not what depresses me. These things, they let be more human. MORE human. They let me move out into the World so I don’t have to stay in the house. They let me speak words that people understand. (374)

Barney’s comments indicate the importance of assistive technologies for people with disabilities – perhaps inadvertently asking ablebodied audiences (and his date) to be mindful of abilities many of us take for granted. Doing so also inverts ableist expectations on disability’s behalf, or of disabled experiences as somehow perpetually miserable.

As a counter to tired manifestations of disability in the cultural/narrative imaginary and practice, Belluso defies ideas of disability being equated to “damaged pleasure systems” (qtd. in Tolan 21). Given the time and place of the couple’s interaction, and as the red wine takes effect, the sexual tension and interest that exists between them – since Barney’s first (misunderstood) line, “Flowers,” that he forgot to bring – begins to resolve. Belluso writes,

YO: It was okay. I think this wine is going to my head.
BARNEY: Me too.
YO: You’re handsome.
BARNEY: Thank you.
YO: I’ve never been attracted to a guy in a wheelchair before.
BARNEY: I don’t like the word wheelchair. (375)

As mentioned, this scene’s effectiveness resides in its evasion of predictability simply by asserting a disabled perspective ahead of a heteronormative one, although Yo’s reference to him as “handsome” increases narrative, and “performatve” expectations. In other words, it is more important for Barney to get to know Yo while also asserting his own preferences, rather than ignore what bothers him as an easier route to intimacy. Barney then mentions, at length, some of the metaphorical reasons he (and many
others) dislike the term\textsuperscript{139}: “No, I don’t [like t]he word wheelchair [. . .] People associate the word wheelchair with depression. They use terms like ‘wheelchair-bound’, the word \textit{bound}, like it’s a ball and chain. Or the term \textit{confined} to a wheelchair. \textit{Confined}. It’s a depressing word, and I’m tired of being depressed” (375). Barney tells her he calls his chair a “bicycle,” which, Yo agrees, is a more optimistic term. After some debate about the meaning of words, Yo interrupts: “Yeah, well I didn’t really come here for an exchange of philosophy, Barney” (375). After she asks, “So. Do you, would you come home with me tonight?,” Barney replies, “Your house. Are there stairs to get in the front door?” (375). The humour (and awkwardness) in their exchange arrives in a shift from inaccessible imagery in language defining disability to the realities of inaccessible architecture that directly affects disabled experience and the functioning of its pleasure systems. Although Yo suggests there’s a “side door,” or alternatively that they can visit his place, Barney lets her down graciously, telling her “I’m not, ready for that. Not yet. I want to. [My] kind of vulnerability, it’s not easy. I want to be close to you. I really do. But not now. Is that okay?” To which Yo replies, “Of course. Yes, of course” (376).

Belluso’s \textit{Voice Properties} covers much ground, in part by negotiating an equitable space for disability – where the text reflects experience. Belluso avoids overt metaphors that polarize disability in the same way he avoids overt (hetero)sexual payoffs that polarize the outcomes of couple narratives, while keeping pleasure, desire, friendship and a sense of humour intoned and firmly in touch.

\textbf{How to Conclude, or Sharing a Language of Disability through New Metonymy}

“It’s just nice for the world to fit in for us for one day because we spend a lot of time fitting in with the rest of the world.” (Linda Rose, mom of child with Asperger’s, after attending a “relaxed” performance of \textit{Spot’s Birthday Party} designed for children on the autistic spectrum at the Oxford Theatre [UK], BBC News)

Already you have a sentence with which you can make yourself noticeable. With this sentence you can make yourself noticeable in the dark, so no one will think you are an animal. (\textit{Kaspar} 59)

“I’m not going to placate you just because you’re in a wheelchair.” (Yo from Belluso’s \textit{Voice Properties} 375)

\textsuperscript{139} In Beckett’s \textit{Murphy}, Mr. Kelly also has an affinity or “fond[ness]” (277) for his wheelchair during a trip to the park with Celia to fly his kite.
In his chapter “Hearing Things: The Scandal of Speech in Deaf Performance” Michael Davidson discusses some of the tensions in the deaf performance community around the use of text, which he suggests:

pose[s] a threat, not unlike the use of vocalization to translate or interpret the deaf poet’s signing. English text to interpret the deaf person’s intentions would once again co-opt manual signs by linking them to English syntax and grammar. Since there is no written representation of signs, communication among the Deaf must be performed, as it were, in situ. For this reason, philosophers of language since Rousseau have seen manual signing as primitive or narrowly iconic. (93-4)

Davidson’s assessment shares an obvious need to protect deaf culture while exposing an early, yet continual process of ablenationalism and seemingly compulsory ablebodiedness that similarly subsumes figures like Kaspar Hauser in a dominant cultural erasure of difference. In contrast, Davidson notes the work of Joseph Grigely, a scholar and artist who is deaf, fluent in ASL, and communicates his art largely through the medium of writing on paper,¹⁴⁰ such as shared post-it notes. Davidson refers to Grigely’s process as the creation of an oxymoronic “deaf optic,” which he describes as a “bicultural approach to communication in which a hearing viewer must communicate with the deaf interlocutor through nonacoustic means”; in this framework, writing a note or fragment that ends up on the wall of a gallery becomes a metonymy for spoken, audible conversation (95). In a similar way, during Belluso’s Voice Properties audience members hear Barney’s date, Yo, but her lips do not move.

As Sandahl reminds us once more, “Disability is a constant set of negotiations” (“Why Disability Identity Matters” 240), and as Davidson’s brief comparison shows, perspectives and experiences are seldom unified. Given this chapter’s critique of state and corporate shaping, treatment and expectations of cognitive and/or physical disorder, as a sort of market-based moral response to disorder¹⁴¹ – something Handke’s Kaspar approximates with plenty of invasive sounds and lights – it is imperative to assert, discuss and theorize cultural acts and performances that resist monolithic assumptions of disabled experience on behalf of larger normative audiences as a means to rectify a

¹⁴⁰ Davidson also notes how Grigely’s practice differs from Peter Cook and Aaron Williamson, two deaf performance artists who favour signing and gesturing over the written word (94).
¹⁴¹ Canadian correctional investigator Howard Sapers is currently raising concerns that “the corrections system is already struggling with the number of inmates who need mental health care and aren’t getting it” and that Bill C-54 will result in “more people with serious mental illness in prisons rather than in hospitals” (Fitzpatrick).
range of inequities. Disability, then, along with our collective desire to communicate, can and will continue to create new metaphors and ways to think through and perform our selves to our selves, As Griegly and Belluso’s practice indicates, the experience brings value to many who have been “figured” otherwise.

Handke’s Kaspar illustrates the problems and inadequacies of language to contain and control disability, and that language is neither absolute, nor a reflection of normalcy. “Let’s talk” in some ways implies “let’s fix.” As this chapter explores, language and its uses are not universal, nor a viable solution or route of communication within dominant, ablenational constraints. As Belluso’s Voice Properties reminds us, it is not always reliable within personal, physical and technological constraints either, yet Barney and Yo depart with our interests. The concept of forcing normalcy is oxymoronic, but unlike Davidson’s new figurative considerations above, Kaspar’s reconstruction does not ease his experiences. Kaspar states, “I mean to say that a sentence is a monster” (139), not the individual or the disability.

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142 Noting the performance of “passing” and disability’s oppression at seemingly ironic turns, a 2001 article in the Daily Mail mentions how sober, disabled playwright Peter Kearns “was refused entry [and barred from] a posh [Edinburgh] brasserie because bouncers thought he was drunk [. . .] even after he told [them of his] cerebral palsy. The internationally-renowned playwright and writer-in residence at Dublin’s Abbey Theatre [. . .] had flown from Dublin to attend the Degenerate Festival at the Theatre Workshop, the first disability arts festival in Scotland” (“Bistro Bouncers Show Door to Disabled Playwright”).
Chapter Four:
What’s Your Sign? Powering the Prosthesis and Disabling Lines of Contemporary Constraint

“No amount of deconstruction, re-arrangement, replacement, insertion, and quotation can diminish the concern and identification with the life of the cripple with whom he maintains a loving, if sometimes painful relationship.” (Jasia Reichardt, in a review of David Wills’s *Prosthesis* 450)

“Isn’t it worth the loss of a hand to have created the man of the future, the machine-man?” (Rotwang, from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*)

“The wooden leg can easily be read as [a] pretext for all manner of digression as well as the one solid piece of evidence that keeps all this together.” (Wills, *Prosthesis* 30)

On May 24, 2013 a BBC story featured Sun Jifa, a farmer from Northern China, who, after losing both of his lower arms in an explosion, spent several years creating his own prosthetics. The video shows him tilling a dry field, actively using his arms while the translated voiceover mentions that he’s “determined not to be beaten.” His motivation to craft his own prosthetics (and in disability discourse “overcome his disability”) is also socioeconomic, as “ones offered to him by local hospitals proved beyond his budget.”

Now, he states, “I can do some farm work, I’m not useless. I really feel a weight has lifted.” Though the subject of a good-news-human-interest story, Sun’s prosthetics reinforce problematic metaphorical and biopolitical connections between an ability to perform manual labour and perceptions of usefulness.

The BBC report subsumes his experiences and pragmatism as “a money-making opportunity, a new venture that allows him to help others.” And, indeed, he has. A Live Leak report, “Chinese Farmer Builds His Own Bionic Arms,” notes: “Sun said that he has already sold around one thousand steel limbs for about 3000 yuan [$526 CAD] each, which he says is only a tenth the price of what most hospitals charge for higher-quality prosthetics.” The story’s description of his arms as “bionic” sensationalizes his inventions.

143 Although China has “the world’s largest disabled population” Cui Xiaohuo writes that “prosthetics are expensive, costly to maintain and often poorly made – attributes that exclude most Chinese from getting to use them” (*China Daily*). Regardless, a burgeoning market exists. “China Artificial Limb & Man-Made Organs Mfg. Industry Profile” shares data for the “top 10 hot regions” of growth in sales. *Business Reporter’s* article from 2010, “Government Urged to Establish Prosthetic’s Industry on Strong Footings” notes Dr. Khalid Niaz Niazi’s analogous assessment of access to prosthetics in Pakistan, suggesting “Almost 9 million people [. . .] cannot get standard artificial limbs [for] cheap rates as [the] government has imposed 40 per cent taxes on the import of raw material being used in manufacturing of limbs.”
as having powers beyond the human, and implies that he does too. Within such threads of ablenationalism and sensationalism, and given how the BBC frames these events as an individualist capitalist success in communist China, prosthetics – often designed to normalize, ease or erase disability for the user and the public – become multidimensional as objects of media coverage and as commodity with significance beyond their materiality. Framing Sun’s significant disability-generated innovation as a capitalist bootstrap narrative neoliberalizes disability on a national level (and internationally through media exposure) by shifting a portion of China’s prosthetic limb industry to successful individual control in a way that shapes what we all want.

Access to affordable, functional assistive technologies for Sun and others like him empowers disabled experiences and helps improve material conditions of existence. However, it is important to consider that not everyone desires the same things, or can afford to desire them. What of people who cannot pay for prosthetics at any price or for whom disability is not something to “overcome” or negate with a hard day’s work? Given such context, how might the prosthetic sensationalize, empower and problematize our cultural, fictional and filmic imaginaries? My final chapter explores a range of texts (theory, film) and their narratives to illustrate how disability creates moments of sociotextual inequity. Excessive representations and contradictory significations of prostheses add to, or attempt to make whole, disability’s often-dominant occupation of culturally and physically negative spaces. Technology becomes bionic, glamourized, fetishized, sexualized and a signifier of morality in ways that invite able-bodied subjects (and perhaps the disabled subject also) to disavow disability by filling its space with something else. I follow my methodology in earlier chapters of reading a materiality of disability that challenges spaces of avoidance in dominant theoretical literary/cultural criticism (e.g. the importance of disability experience in Beckett, or reconsidering the historical “treatment” and role of the “wild child phenomenon” [Calandra] in relation to Handke’s Kaspar). More specifically, Lennard Davis’s key disability studies paper “Nude Venuses, Medusa’s Body, and Phantom Limbs – Disability and Visuality,” (1999) helps reveal disability’s inequity within most narratives and systems of compulsory ableism. If, as he notes, “disability defines the negative space the body must not occupy” (68), then what is possible within the spaces (often indicative of absence in need of passing as a fix) where, for example, real prosthetics and people live? And, how do our narratives (fiction and otherwise) challenge or maintain such possibilities and practices?
Taking up the space of Sun’s previous limbs with his prosthetics brings economic and social possibilities for himself and other amputees who seek his products. The BBC notes, while showing a scene of him riding his motorbike, that he is “something of a celebrity in his hometown.” Arguably, his unique invention, along with perceptions of overcoming his disability, necessitates such a quizzical sense of notoriety. Does foreign media coverage present him and his prosthetics as spectacle when prostheses occupy such a comparatively positive space under a socioeconomic lens? The brief item on Sun appropriates and intersects the human-interest news genre in a couple of unique ways made possible by disability and its at-times malleable status and experience. The story’s novel framing of Sun’s pragmatic efforts places him in compulsory able, ablenationalist space that “valoriz[es] able-bodied norms of inclusion as the naturalized qualification of citizenship” (Snyder, Mitchell 113). This “naturalization” devalues (and, ironically, in a selective-market-friendly communist system, prices him out of a “fix” for) his disability. When he declares that he has to function “normally in order to feed his family,” he also brings needed attention to the biopolitical inequities that underlie “reading” his story and experiences of disability and the stories (and histories) of other amputees in similar situations as socioeconomic “success” stories. While Sun’s fashioning of his own prosthetics for the purposes of labour is not unique, the report (along with several others) presents his “crude” prosthetics – yet more functional, and affordable than those sold by the state – being tried out and favoured by another farm-worker and amputee of limited income. Therefore, while friendlier access to the prosthetic empowers some people on the margins of labour, Sun’s valuable solution to lessen the (metaphorical) weight of unproductiveness still maintains the disabled body as “less than.”

This lack brings problems to fantasies of empowerment. What prosthetics facilitate in our literary, filmic and cultural narratives (i.e. the supercrip with his or her bionic limbs) override material realities of living with prostheses. Disabling normative systems of power, Davis reminds us, is possible “when the body is seen apart from its existence as an object of production or consumption” (68). While I do not think disability critique has a problem with labour, with the worker, or prefers not to talk about workers, as Sun’s story illustrates, under any economic regime, that separation is difficult to imagine. I will attempt to disable such constraints. Sun’s challenges to the normative solutions offered by the medical model of disability reveal sociotextual inequities via

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144 In June 2013, the British Columbia government announced a new $25 monthly fee for wheelchair users in nursing homes (Tieleman).
moments of prosthetic excess. His efforts invite theoretical models, narratives and practices that empower disability in productive and problematic ways.

Images of prosthetics at work and rest in 1915 and 2012 show a “master craftsman with no hands or feet working at the lathe, where he earns his bread like a healthy man” (qtd. in Poore 11). At right, Sun Jifa rests next to one of his prosthetic lower arms. Although detached from Sun’s body, the prosthetic’s foregrounding in the image reveals the intricacies of its construction and emphasizes its importance to Sun’s labour and activities (The Telegraph).

As the title of my final chapter suggests, stories and presentations of disability provide ways to dismantle normative policies, narrativization, and prior modes of critical thinking. Often, “improvements” to disability are framed as inclusive of everyone in ways that are at pains to suppress more detailed, historically contextualized, non-normative accounts of disability experiences – leaving them largely unwritten, or rewritten in normative terms, constraints, images and imaginations – even as the materiality of the disabled body (with and without prosthetics) reads otherwise. The beginning of this chapter oscillates through a range of prosthetic conceptualizations and materialities, of its theories and lived experiences. I explore the prosthetic’s etymologies and offer a multivalent critical and cultural discussion of the multivalent prosthetic.

As the subject of neoliberal media, a means of “overcoming” disability in narrative and as a crucial component of people’s lives, I will focus on key ideas and practices associated with prostheses in media, film and literature to demonstrate how the concept of sociotextual inequity helps to make sense of a more inclusive materiality of disability and its possibilities. To this end, I consider problematic presentations of disability – and prosthetics – in two sensationalist, revenge-themed films: Robert Rodriguez’s Planet Terror (2007) and Noboru Iguchi’s Machine Girl (Kataude Mashin Gâru) (2008). Each film serves generic expectations with graphic violence and over-the-top plots, and while they fulfill a longer-standing pattern of cultural representations that use the prosthesis as narrative enabler and moral barometer, each film also empowers, rather than vilifies, its recently disabled female protagonist. Following from these links, I close the chapter by
moving from a pop-cultural context to consider Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” (1955), a short story that features “Joy/Hulga,” a young academic who uses – and loses – a prosthetic leg. Contrary to the films above, notions of disabled empowerment – sensational or not – disappear. O’Connor’s “classic” text demonstrates how particular readings of Joy/Hulga’s prosthetic leg have come to overdetermine the work’s reception by diminishing ideas of disability empowerment via heteronormativity, and (excesses of) divine significance. Such overdetermination, then, provides a model to intervene in problematic (binary) narrative readings of disability more generally. Disability readings of the prosthetic in these three texts, among brief inclusions of others, will, I hope, affirm how texts that range from little to no previous disability theorization (*Planet Terror* and *Machine Girl*) to a central text of study (“Good Country People”) illustrate the importance of attending to the power, agency and problems of the prosthetic in narrative, culture and experience.

**Proselytizing the Prosthetic and Other Theoretical Instabilities**

“*Advertise* your leg in the largest way possible.” Henry W. Bellows (1862 [qtd. in Herschbach 26])

“He’s going to become a whole man, paradoxically, without that leg.” Dr. Russell Reid (2000 [qtd. in Evans 309])

“[T]here are cases where a prosthesis is *still* a prosthesis.” (Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand* 176)

A disability theory of sociotextual inequity exposes often-contradictory relationships between representations of disability in texts, our cultural imaginary and the experiences and histories of disability. Sun Jifa’s story combines the sociocultural and economic power of those representations and the mechanisms of their employment with real conditions/considerations of existence for those who experience disability. How do prosthetic theories – from Sarah S. Jain’s call to consider the material of prosthesis and the bodies who use them, to Mitchell and Snyder’s field-shifting focus upon the ways disability “supports” many narratives’ movement towards normative closure – negotiate the body’s relationship to the prosthetic? While being mindful of media theory’s tradition of technology as a prosthetic extension of human experience (Benjamin, McLuhan), how does the prosthesis contribute to and challenge inequitable experiences of disability,
and, play out in close readings of narrative? As a starting point, I will consider how prostheses figure in the under-theorized discussion of disability’s slippery ontology. Do theorizations of the prosthetic inform Davidson’s idea of a “post-ableist era” (57), or Lennard Davis’s mention of “post-identity” (“Disability: The Next Wave or Twilight of the Gods?” 529), that builds upon his earlier ideas of dismodernism? How do such relatively recent theoretical shifts in disability studies account for cultural/film theorist Vivian Sobchack’s observation as someone who “uses prostheses without feeling ‘posthuman’” (20)? Placing these three theoretical ‘post-terms’ together, I believe, helps establish three things: 1) the uncertainty of disabled ontology; 2) the perpetual tensions between theory and practice, and; 3) how these tensions can bring to light experiences, histories and connections unaccounted for and those in need of discussion. Davis argues for post-identity discourse in disability studies as a means to maintain its “viabilit[y]” (529) and to clarify the catch-all “disability” as inclusive of all disabilities – something Simi Linton refers to as “the vector on which disability falls.” However, she continues by advocating a commons of inclusive disability discourse, “to find the place of disability in some universal” (“What is Disability Studies?” 520).

I do not wish to refute conceptualizations of ‘post’ anything here, but rather, to reaffirm them as spaces/indicators of promise and anxiety as challenges to dominant ideologies that maintain and privilege wholeness and/or ability. Within our era of continual socioeconomic panic, and, certainly within an ablenationalistic context, bodily ability and prosthesis as an enabler of work and imagination (in image and function) assert pressures upon disability. Biopolitical, eugenic echoes of modernism indicate clearly the importance of asserting disability identity as gain (with all appendages in tow) to the human – post or otherwise. As I discuss in chapter one with the dominant discourse around Beckett, modernism’s corrective imperatives to individualize, metaphorize and deny the materiality of the disabled body still lingers in contemporary

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145 Margrit Shildrick also uses this term.
146 Snyder and Mitchell’s *Cultural Locations of Disability* outlines the emergence and practice of eugenics in the modernist era, something that they considered before starting the project as a “a distant memory or ideology that had collapsed under the weight of its own inertia, incoherence, and ill-fated prophecies.” They were surprised to discover, therefore how “Eugenic th[inking] played a crucial role in defining [. . .] deviance that allowed physical, sensory, and cognitive differences to shadow each other” (ix-x).
147 This is a phrase I borrow from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s recent presentation at Liverpool Hope University’s Avoidance and/in the Academy International Conference on Disability Culture and Education, “Disability Gain.” Her work builds upon the positivity of disabled experience in the context of Harriet McBride Johnson’s response to ethicist Peter Singer, “Unspeakable Conversations.”
literary theory and practice. Similar to disability’s invisibility here, prosthetic discourses can also privilege technology over the body to minimize disabled experiences. How do “post” subject positions coincide with advancements in assistive technologies, experiences of incarceration or institutionalization? What do such shifts do to the field when concepts and experiences of disability are already myriad, celebratory and contentious, and so-often under threat (policed) by normates and normative ideologies?

Davidson’s notion of a post-ableist era stems from his observations of the many co-dependent relationships of disabled and often not physically active characters in Beckett’s work acting as a “parable of the limits of agency” (57). Allegorically, the shifting status of realities, identities and experiences of disability already marked and mediated (socially, culturally, economically, medically, legally) relative to a normative standard of ability renders ideas of dependence repellent. A theoretical position of interdependence reveals inequalities in readings of disability and aims to end them. This process helps to rectify sociotextual inequity by disabling lines of contemporary constraint. How might social relations, then, operate in prosthetic fashion to maintain/operate as support systems for the body in a post-ableist fashion? Davidson’s brief mapping of agency through characters in a narrative illustrates how disability and its close relationships can also occupy physical spaces that defy ableism, regardless of disability’s disavowal within larger normative culture to maintain an exclusivity that suggests some types of disability are acceptable when exceeding average bodily expectations.

As a segue into a more specific discussion of theoretical, figurative and material aspects of prosthetics, the rise and (presumptive) fall of Oscar Pistorius, nicknamed ‘blade runner’ (whose image appears in my conclusion), illustrates overt media-laden signification as material modifier of ability, and cultural signifier of disability. The South African sprinter is currently on trial for the murder of his girlfriend, fashion model Reeva Steenkamp, who was shot to death on Valentine’s Day, 2013. One might ask what role his prosthetics play in a larger ableist cultural uptake of disability – especially in terms of disability as something to overcome. What is the value of Pistorius’s cheetah legs

148 As a disability experience analogue (which also creates important discussions of human and animal relationships and their associative values that I have mentioned briefly in my thesis and are also garnering more attention as a newer locus of disability theory) Rod Michalko describes his duality with his guide dog, Smokie, as a uniquely singular experience for a uniquely disabled experience beyond the confines of ableism – a relationship he describes as being “alone together in our identities and this togetherness binds them into our identity. Together and separate we are alone and alone we are one” (qtd. in Kumari-Campbell 55).
To be sure, he accommodates ideas of post-ableism in terms of his running ability, and his dismodern-esque, bionic-type capabilities invite new comprehensions of human ontology via technology. His ‘fight’ for and inclusion with able-bodied athletes on the world stage reinforces ableist ideology – in other words, to run “just like them” – unless, of course, the future brings able-bodied athletes who want to compete alongside Paralympians.

It is also important to consider Pistorius’s claim that he thought his girlfriend was an intruder and that he panicked and shot her, in part, because he wasn’t wearing his prosthetic legs and so, presumably, felt more vulnerable. Whether we believe him or not, his use of disability as an excuse for his own actions becomes part of a larger history of excusing violence against women and critique the larger cultural role of disability within an aggressive and presumptively masculine, heteronormative ableism.

Post-ableism finds theoretical resonance with Davis’s idea that disability studies generate its own understandings of stigma without using Goffman for credibility as a theory. This shift helps signify disability’s uniqueness beyond the context of Goffman’s notions of everyday life as a performance that has ablebodiedness at its centre. Disability studies’ welcome and difficult interdependent relationships with other minority fields and bodies recognize and resist the hegemonic power Goffman’s relatively early assertions of white male, able, heterosexual privilege through culture and experiences oppressed or outside of such power. As disability theory moves from emergent to dominant (to borrow from Raymond Williams), disability and larger universal discourse and uptake of its concerns and celebrations often become residual without the context or dimensionality of the cultural and experiential models of disability.

What role might prostheses play in discussions of post-identity, ability, or in thinking through the diversity and possibilities of human bodies and disabled experience? Given disability’s history of occupying negative cultural and physical

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149 In August 2013, his defense lawyers suggested as a disabled person (and gun enthusiast) he “felt very vulnerable” and according to ballistics reports, fired shots “from his stumps” rather than taking the time to attach his prosthetic limbs and premeditate murder (Timeslive).


151 Ironically, perhaps, I discovered Davis and Linton’s concerns in Cary Wolfe’s 2009 text, What is Posthumanism? – a question Sobchack’s comments speak to directly as, presumably, an unsatisfactory designation. I also believe it is important to note, however briefly, that the concerns of Davis, Linton (and several others) appear in a special conference issue of PMLA from 2005 about disability studies and the university. In 2010, Snyder and Mitchell reaffirm the importance of such discourse in more austere times, suggesting, “Higher education provides think tank opportunities where the ideals of equity run hard against forces of inequity. Consequently, much
spaces, I return to my argument that if excessive representations and contradictory significations of prostheses subsume and sensationalize disability, then, arguably, the idea of prosthesis “making whole” fails. The allure of prosthetic technology and its fantastical representation in the films I discuss necessitates a literal grounding of the prosthesis to reveal sociotextual inequity between lived experiences of disability and the magical overdetermination and narrative freight of fictional prosthetics.

In her chapter, “A Leg to Stand On,” Vivian Sobchack explores the vexed problem of how material discussions of prostheses contend with many difficult figurative and theoretical applications of the term. She writes:

(with the exception of disability studies) the literal and material ground of the metaphor has largely been forgotten, if not disavowed. [T]he experience and agency of those who, like myself, actually use prostheses without feeling ‘posthuman’ and who, moreover, are often startled to read about all the hidden powers that their prostheses apparently exercise both in the world and in the imaginations of cultural theorists [as] a rhetoric [. . .] that is always located elsewhere[,] displac[e] and generaliz[e] the prosthetic before exploring it first on its own quite extraordinary complex, literal (and logical) ground. (20)

While Sobchack’s concern to focus on material prostheses and the experiences of those who use them are a significant part (as she notes) of disability studies discourse, part of the problem (and, perhaps opportunity) for the term and the material alike is its larger cultural appropriation as a theoretical master key and as object of cultural appropriation, imagination and fetishization. Akin to my (at times, wariness of) discussing the breakup of the term/identity “disability”—as a means to locate and dimensionalize histories and experiences of disability—the same process occurs with the term “prosthesis” as a marker of identity and difference. In other words, I notice the (often metaphorical) use of prosthetics happening in similar ways to other representations of disability. However, as an indicator of identity, creativity (and more problematically as a socioeconomic and critical tool), I believe ideas of real and theoretical prostheses help expand the discussion of disability’s possibilities.

Sobchack also, thankfully, does not forget the literal of the ground and the prosthetics that may encounter it. Her concerns, however, reveal a clear sociotextual inequity: while disability-themed narratives and figurations abound in culture, few of these seem concerned to share the material details of lived disability experience. Davidson’s phrase suggesting sometimes a prosthesis is just a prosthesis (though I am
paraphrasing a little here), is an important reminder to anchor the materiality of the body in these theoretical discussions. I doubt any creative or cultural writers wish to divest the prosthesis of its metaphorical weight (with Sun Jifa in view) or power of assemblage; however, I do believe much more attention must be paid to the real experiences and considerations of people whose lives—and identities—are at times mediated by prosthetics in social, economic and cultural ways. To this end, it also seems important to stop short of declaring the prosthetic as universal—insofar as everything is a prosthetic (from my computer to your glass eye) and we all use them and get what they are about, etc. In this, I likewise concur with Linton that critiquing the idea that “everyone is disabled in some way” is an important moment and practice for disability studies (“What is Disability Studies?” 520). Put another way, Dianne Price Herndl suggests, “If we are all disabled in some way, then we cannot possibly discriminate against the disabled and there can be no legal protections and no serious attempts at making venues accessible” (594). Her sarcasm, unfortunately, plays out in very real ways, including the stereotype of a disabled person who requires access or assistive technologies in the workplace or other social spaces as an incessant complainer or drain on capital resources.\^{152}

The idea that we are not all disabled, a by-now-overwrought concept in disability studies, is also easily forgotten around the importance of prosthetics, especially in relation to people who use them—for access, mobility, work, security, etc.—as a part of themselves. Fiona Kumari-Campbell visits a couple of ‘prosthetic perspectives’, considering the wheelchair (the ubiquitous “sign” as signifier of international disability—though less than 10% of people with disabilities use them) as a prosthesis with compelling material and social import. Kumari-Campbell notes Loree Erickson, disabled artist, and porn star (who describes her own practice as a productive “Femmegimp” politics [42]) and her relationship to her wheelchair as “adamant [in that] she ‘moves through the world in a wheelchair’, which she considers part of her.” In a discussion about how such technology can “unify and transmogrify the corporeal and psychic life of the person with disability” (Kumari-Campbell 54), like Erickson, Kumari-Campbell brings attention to what I believe is an under-theorized discussion of people’s

\^{152} The title of Davis’s text, Bending over Backwards and other Difficult Positions, comes from a cliché often used by those resistant to provide access (after the implementation of the ADA in the US, for example) for those with disabilities as having to assume a super-human position of ‘bending over backwards for these people’. As mentioned in chapter two, Clint Eastwood certainly harbours such resentment.
relationship to assistive technologies as an extension of themselves. She notes, Ruthee, a person who also uses a wheelchair, and her/“our” collective unease when people kick our chair, move our chair while we’re in it, or touch our chair without necessarily touching our body, there’s no difference… The chair is a part of me! People don’t understand that this is not a place to sit, it is not a piece of furniture, it is who we are, it’s an extension of ourselves. (qtd. in Kumari-Campbell 54)

How prosthetic as material of assistive technology becomes a person’s identity and a physical extension of it – in a real way—materializes the often abstract notion of distance and space that occurs when assumptions of disability are humanized and explored beyond the objects and signs that signify them. As an extension, in this way, the prosthesis offers sites for the body beyond the body, or, in a sense after, or “post-body.” Distinguishing this term from “post-human” distinguishes a disability studies discussion of prostheses from one of general cultural theory in material, often-physical ways. Similar to Beckett’s characters’ interdependent relationships, one is more whole with the other.

My deferral of the “meaning” of prosthesis reflects its shifts as material and in theorization. That a prosthesis also operates as abstract concept – beyond its material – finds success because of its material reality in the (larger, normative, ableist, dominant) cultural imaginary, most probably as an artificial limb of some kind. Such semi-abstractions occupy and create a sort of inverse relationship to the pull of literary and cultural disability studies, which often seek to materialize153 metaphors of disability. As the metaphors and material of prosthesis attempt to complete a centuries-old cultural, economic and social project to make bodies whole, productive and disabled bodies less noticeable, metaphors of disability often perpetuate lack.

David Wills’s discussion/etymology of the term prosthesis, first used in English in 1553, and “borrowed directly from the Greek in its rhetorical sense of the addition of a syllable to the beginning of a word,” reflects a linguistic construction or reliance upon a prefix to make words and their meaning more succinct or, perhaps, “whole.” Language’s inextricable relationship to the body (as Handke’s Kaspar explores, for example) affixes meaning to the body that it cannot adequately contain or control. As such, the body’s relationship to the word is always inadequate. By extension, is the prosthetic’s relationship to the body inadequate? One hundred and sixty years later, in 1704, the medical use of the term appears to indicate “a replacement of a missing body part with

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153 Also consult David Mitchell’s earlier essay “Narrative Prosthesis and The Materiality of Metaphor.”
an artificial one” (*Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*, qtd. in Wills 218). Wills’s 1995 text, *Prosthesis*, mediates his relationship with his father’s prosthetic leg from personal, historical, geographical and linguistic/mirroring perspectives between (him)self and language, expression, and his relationship to the word, which he establishes throughout as a prosthetic one. Wills’s creative and theoretical success with the text, arguably, arrives from his consideration of text as prosthetic. Some unease around the use of prosthesis, as theory and object, arrives out of the word’s cultural mis-applications within prosthetic qualities of language and theories themselves. If we take Wills’s suggestion that “The prosthesis is an artifice, a contrivance, a fabrication” (165), in addition to the term’s originary grammatical usage, are prosthetic limbs, for example, metonymies of prosthesis’s original meaning?

I do not intend to diminish material considerations of prostheses as a “fetishized and ‘unfleshed-out’ catchword” (Sobchack 21); rather, I hope to establish how their inter- connective, interdependent relationships with users challenge theoretical meanings of the term to expose inequities and empowerments that play out upon disabled bodies in texts and outside of them. From a literary disability studies perspective, largely thanks to Mitchell and Snyder’s ur-text in the field, *Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor* (2000), this exposure involves a critique of representations and employments of disability in narrative as abstract and figurative prosthetics that support or make whole narratives that often subsume the actual materiality of disability – and prosthetics – in the process to assert normative expectations. As Mitchell and Snyder note, “Without developed models for analyzing the purpose and function of representational strategies of disability, readers tend to filter a multitude of disability figures absently through their imaginations” (51). Is the same tendency true for a prosthesis? Or, does it insist upon a literal grounding of material in multivalent ways?

Exposing the multivalent prosthesis occupied by disability as a narrative device allows for a consideration of disability on its own terms – linguistically, representationally and physically. Mitchell and Snyder note: “As David Wills suggests, ‘The body’s need to comprehend a materiality external to it is answered via the ruse of language’” (qtd. in *Narrative Prosthesis* 7-8). My quoting of a quote here helps suggest the intertextual and interdependent relationship between language, body and theory. Further, understanding prosthesis as a materiality external to and, experientially speaking (as noted above), part of the body, enriches this relationship. Wills’s *Prosthesis* offers a theoretical underpinning for Mitchell and Snyder’s text – especially in terms of language’s, and by
extension, metaphor’s role as always already signifying (as a bridge to) something else. In turn, *Narrative Prosthesis* dimensionalizes Wills’s idea that, “The word always augments a prosthetic relation to an exterior material that it cannot possess or embody” (qtd. in *Narrative Prosthesis* 7), by applying the relationship of disability representation to narrative construction.

Sally Chivers suggests that Mitchell and Snyder’s narrative prosthesis describes a “fundamental aspect of narratives that often functions to make human bodies appear to be ‘whole’” (177), and that exposing this device (in a formalist sense) allows for its critique. Doing so invites the question: if the prosthesis were absent (literally or figuratively), what difference would it make to the narrative and its outcome? I will discuss narratives that challenge and reinforce dominant clichés and determinisms of prosthetic employment, such as Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People,” shortly. It is important to note, however, that not all disability in narrative operates in prosthetic fashion. A crucial component of disability’s cultural empowerment involves, as I have mentioned, unapologetic narratives of disability on their own terms—something, for example, that Belluso’s *Voice Properties* achieves—by featuring actual assistive (prosthetic) technology and not resolving in heteronormative ableist success by text’s end. Doing so changes cultural attitudes toward disability and its lived experiences.

When representations of disability in narrative operate in prosthetic fashion “to make whole,” disability carries a disproportionate *figurative weight* relative to its experiential agency, often solely to maintain ableism and normalcy while distancing disability as undesirable, as no habitable option. To paraphrase Davis, and as a reminder, disability (and by association, or extension, the prosthesis) takes up the space the body must not occupy. Thankfully, then, as Mitchell and Snyder note, “Language, in Wills’s analysis, cannot walk straight” (124). Though language arguably never walks straight, articulating linguistic expression as non-normative bodily experiences suits Wills’s non-linear, non-normative experiences. The crooked and conjectured substance of Wills’s language—like the meandering structure and style in his text—reflects his

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154 Anosh Irani’s *The Cripple and his Talismans* features a character in search of his lost arm while coming to terms with his new ontology. The narrator revisits an idea that “[his] arm had done the talking before” (14), and that words are inextricable components of the body, stating, “It is not the mind that remembers words. It is muscle. It has to be. Muscles twitch, spotting a familiarity in vowels, sounds, the way words travel through the air in curves and spirals, reaching the ears of those for whom they are meant” (240). Figuratively (and physically) speaking, the narrator’s absence of words subsequent to losing a limb implies a bodily-absorption-of-language theory and reflects the inability of language to contain the body.

155 See Michael Davidson’s discussion of disability as *ostrenergie* in *Concerto for the Left Hand*. 

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grappling with his father’s loss of a leg. Parts of this process for Wills appear in run-on, accretive passages that collect and recollect sensorial moments with his “prosthetic father,” such as “the crunching of gravel [of] his syncopated step” (161), to land upon unique observations. Wills shares a sort of transferable, familial prosthetic experience over time and necessity that shapes bodies and their behaviours with a generative, interdependent creativity. He writes:

My father’s gait is transferred to my mother—I have seen it with my own eyes and have often felt my own balance pulled a little off center when walking with them—she staggers just noticeably as a result of walking for so long in accompaniment with the exaggeratedly deliberate pace of a prosthetic, wavering just enough to clear a wider path than normal as she moves, as wide as that my father needs for his cane and the leg that doesn’t bend with each step, the foot swings out a little as he walks. (165)

Is it possible to reconcile the figurative use of prosthesis as metaphor and the actual lived experience of disabled people who use prosthetics (and those who are shaped by them) by materializing that experience in language itself as (to return to Garland-Thomson) a model of disability gain? From a creative, disabled perspective Mitchell and Snyder’s comment that Wills’ language “cannot walk straight” marks a point of celebration with echoes in the shaky syntax of characters such as Beckett’s Watt and Mina Loy’s Insel, and others whose diction reflects their unique motion and embodiment.

As a mode of claiming these powerful intersections of language, representation, bodies and materiality – while keeping Sobchack’s prosthesis on the ground and Sun Jifa’s experiences in mind – I will problematize, briefly, a couple of compelling ideas from Sarah S. Jain’s 1999 article, “The Prosthetic Imagination: Enabling and Disabling the Prosthesis Trope.” She sets out a useful critique of those who use the term/concept of prosthesis without consideration of the bodies that use them, along with consequent “problems emerging from overgeneralizations of the prosthesis trope” (38). She includes, among others, Mark Seltzer’s influential discussion of “crippled” labourers in Henry Ford’s factory\(^{156}\) to evoke a “double logic of prosthesis”\(^{157}\) that involves a cancellation and extension of self. Seltzer’s claim that a cancellation of self (and agency) occurs with the violent loss of a body part and is extended (and regained to an extent) with

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\(^{156}\) Jain writes: “Ford was adamant that this breaking down of bodies was metaphorical only” (34). Within biopolitical logic, however, as long as disabled workers were producing, then the factory owner makes no distinction in this regard.

\(^{157}\) In a similarly detached-from-the-body fashion far removed from the material and experiential of prosthetics and the disabled body, J. Sage Elwell’s idea of a “triple-logic” of prosthesis as a self extension of identity as data (62), to reflect a contemporary transition from Seltzer’s mechanical age thinking seems fitting.
prosthesis shares a similar impulse to narrative logic that equates agency with wholeness. Jain also considers Mark Wigley's idea of prosthesis in the architectural domain, where his ideas echo Wills's later notion of prosthesis as art and having affect. Wigley writes that the body with prosthesis "becomes a side-effect of its extensions [...] reconstructs the body, transforming its limits, at once extending and convoluting its borders. The body itself becomes artifice" (qtd. in Jain 38). The difference, however, is that Wills locates the artifice within the prosthetic rather than the (disabled) body as a whole – certainly a key distinction to make, especially in terms of non-disabled people speaking for and/or assuming the perceptions and experiences of disability.

Though the films I discuss in my next section trouble the "logic" of prosthesis in humourous, celebratory and highly problematic ways, the prosthesis does become artifice and, troublingly/literally, a side effect of and a metonymy for the body. Similarly, extending Wigley's "side-effect" notion to the experiences of disability diminishes the agency of that experience as secondary to the prosthesis, even if the prosthesis plays a central role in the experience. As Jain suggests, "the use of prosthesis [i]s a tempting theoretical gadget [to] examine the porous places of bodies and tools," and she goes on to note an automatic “overwrit[ing]” of normative “assumptions of a physically disabled body and the liberal premise of the choice of the perfect body” (49). Her at-times thoughtful critique of normative, biopolitical and, in some ways, ablenationalistic ideology becomes necessary when such applications of theory intersect (and attempt to subsume) real embodiment. Her (comparatively early) discussion of biopolitics under (neo)liberalism re-considers the disabled worker under Seltzer's "double logic" as worker rather than problem.

Jain’s trajectory also does well to establish a connection between prosthesis as object that seldom leaves the medical domain for those who use them, but oscillates to the metaphorical for the ablebodied among us, to the manufactured economic need/desire for products as prosthetic. She refers to the proliferation of the automobile and a cultural reliance on it as a quintessential, problematic (North) American prosthesis, and rightly points out that Ford’s automobiles purposely excluded the accommodation of (m)any of the disabled workers who built them. This is a useful reminder that we do not all experience prostheses in the same ways, and that the normalization of the term as multivalent must not subsume dominant use and cultural location of the term as object to make the body (seem) whole again.
Given the breadth of Jain’s discussion, including her moments of disability alignment, I find her closing line/argument curious. She writes: “identity differences and their material consequences are simply incomprehensible through the prosthetic lens” (50). If identity and experience (disabled or not) are often socially constructed and mediated, I wonder what some of the implications of her argument might be? And, who is her audience? How does her claim alter possibilities for those of us who do not use prosthetics, as compared to Sun Jifa, Pistorius or model/actress (and double leg amputee) Aimee Mullins? Though not explicit, I believe Jain attempts to discount prosthetic theories that obfuscate experiences of people who use prosthetics. From a rhetorical perspective, at least, her claim seems surprising if she insists that theorists consider bodily materiality amidst their myriad prosthetic abstractions, even though the term connotes the often-arbitrary meaning of language in its first instance.

What’s the Difference between a Limb and a Machine Gun?
Or, a New Kind of Arms Race

“What matters is showmanship and the way humor can emphasize the mortification of the flesh.” (Benson-Allott, “Grindhouse: An Experiment in the Death of Cinema” 23)

“He’s right. I am a murderer. But until six months ago I was just an ordinary high-school girl who could hold her little brother with her left arm.” (Ami, from Machine Girl)

“Humanity’s last hope rests on a high-powered machine gun.” (Tagline from a promotional poster for Planet Terror)

V.A. Musetto’s brief New York Post review of Noboru Iguchi’s The Machine Girl (Kataude Mashin Gâru) from May 23, 2008, begins as follows:

DID you hear the one about the schoolgirl who loses her left arm in a fight with mobsters and has it replaced by an eight-barrel machine gun (shades of Rose McGowan in [Planet Terror]), which she uses to exact vengeance on the bullies who killed her brother and his best pal? (“Gunning for Outrage”)

Musetto’s narrative set-up for his readers brings the expectation of a punch line that he never delivers, invariably reflecting his caveat for viewers (and readers, too, perhaps) not to take Iguchi’s exceedingly graphic and violent film of revenge and exploitation too seriously. Musetto assures viewers that they “will have a kick-ass time – if they have a strong stomach, that is.” And, he is certainly not incorrect with his brief plot outline, comparing the film’s protagonist, Ami (Minase Yashiro) to Planet Terror’s Cherry Darling (Rose McGowan), or in alluding to the movie’s numerous disturbing, over-the-top scenes
and special effects – the vast majority of which involve excessive amounts of fake blood spraying from various fatal injuries, occasionally to spatter the camera’s lens.

Upon closer inspection, however (assuming one’s stomach is able enough), Musetto’s rhetoric asks us to agree that Iguchi’s Machine Girl is a joke – and be in on it, even as did-you-hear-the-one-about-jokes often invoke (similar to Belluso’s from Voice Properties) stereotypical imaginaries of race, sexuality and/or disability that result in inequities for the target(s) of the joke. The film’s many excesses (from a ninja boss who feeds his blood to his son, to making their sushi-chef eat sushi made of the chef’s own fingers) and uneasy/unlikely moments of humour – like Ami having her arm battered and fried into tempura – reflect a stylized grindhouse genre in a literal grinding of the body sense, replete with sexualized prosthetic gadgets, including a drill-bra. In some ways, the grinding of bodies that propels this film (as fleshy movie props and as misogynistic objects of fetishization), like Rodriguez’s Planet Terror, also critiques and plays up the idea of a vapid entertainment industry as a biopolitical meat-grinder. Though the film’s many, often-atrocious problems (and successes) result from its over awareness of its genre and its propensity to undo much of its constructive work by refusing to take itself seriously, as a new pop-culture space of disability studies critique and sociotextual inequity analysis, the film’s representations offer more than the premise/promise of a joke and a “kick-ass good time.”

The violent amputation of Ami’s arm by yakuza during the course of tracking down the killers of her little brother, Yu and his friend, Takeshi, helps build her eventual, short-lived friendship with Takeshi’s mom, fellow protagonist, training partner (shown via semi-humorous montage) and mechanic, Miki (Asami Sugiura). Extending the narrative’s prosthetic dependence as a form of pre-prosthetic medicalization, Ami’s wounded arm is expertly stitched by Miki’s fellow mechanic husband, who – just before ninjas attack and slice him like a jelly mold – completes Ami’s machine-gun prosthetic and throws it to her. While all characters onscreen stare as it floats overhead in slow motion, to attach seamlessly – and fire from – her stump, Ami’s high-powered arm-gun becomes the vehicle for the film’s graphic movement and resolution – making the story whole through a removal of a character’s parts (and the parts of many others). From perspectives of disability studies and sociotextual inequity, Machine Girl certainly challenges the possibilities of – and enters into – the history of what a loss of a limb enables on film. In other words, how do disability-inspired and enabled narratives that feature literal

156 Conveniently, he got his practice by being the son of a doctor.
prosthetics also operate as, to return to Mitchell and Snyder for a moment, narrative prosthesis? Prosthetics help return the story (and its characters) to a semblance of normalcy and ideology of wholeness (akin to an Althusserian cinematic ISA) by film’s end, however far-fetched.

For useful historical and biopolitical context of the reach of prosthetics and how filmic narratives can rely on the loss of a limb (and its prosthetic replacement), I offer a brief consideration of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927). Specifically, I focus on its scientist-inventor character Rotwang – who has a prosthetic lower arm clad in black. After he successfully animates his (now iconic) “machine-man” (who resembles a woman) for the city/factory boss Frederson’s amazement, the film invites the possibility of replacing workers with (theoretically prosthetic) machines. Though an idea that, true to normative narrative resolution, never comes to fruition, such a gesture makes ideological room for the scenario. Rotwang exclaims, making his prosthesis hard to miss, “Isn’t it worth the loss of a hand to have created the man of the future, the machine-man?” (*Metropolis*). As Carole Poore notes, Lang’s film helps establish and maintain “the social trend toward functionalizing the bodies of workers in the service of industry and capitalist profits rather than transforming alienated working conditions so that workers would be treated like human beings rather than machines” (75). Though *Machine Girl* is not as worker-focused as its title might imply, the loss of Ami’s arm in the film enables a future weaponized body, whose sole purpose in the film is to kill. Even as her acts are couched in a morality of revenge, several scenes present her as unable to control or stop her actions and echo Poore’s concerns – as though her newly functioning body “alienates” her in a pseudo-Marxist fashion from her previous “working” conditions. The importance of a prosthetic limb to films like *Machine Girl*, and, as I will discuss briefly, *Planet Terror*, illustrate when a prosthesis is not just a prosthesis, especially in terms of what the technology of film is capable of doing in creating the artistic possible of future bodies – even as the main subjects echo a past grindhouse genre.

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159 In *Disability in Twentieth Century German Culture* Carole Poore mentions an “ironic short prose piece” written “Shortly after the Kapp Putsch in 1920 [by] the dadaist Raoul Hausmann” suggesting that, as Poore notes, “Germany needs workers with prostheses because artificial limbs never tire and the proletarians could then work twenty-five hours per day.” And, that “the officer’s solution for rebuilding Germany [after WWI and a failed revolution] is ‘a prosthetic economy instead of a Soviet dictatorship.’” She suggests that the “article was not mere dadaist silliness but rather a concrete satire that referred to the peppy discourse in rehabilitation circles about getting disabled veterans back to work as soon as possible” (33).

160 A recent viral-video features amputee Christina Stephens who builds and attempts to use a lower leg prosthesis made of Lego.
In an interview Iguchi reveals his intentions and inspirations for *Machine Girl*, stating that he:

had this sort of idea for a long time. It was originally ‘One Armed Big Busty Girl.’ It was [a] simple idea such as a girl in bikini got her arm chopped off then takes revenge . . . something like that. Then, when I started to think of plot, the idea of putting [a] machine gun on the arm was added. It was based on my passion to make a woman-fighting-action movie [. . .] I was influenced by the ghost houses or freak shows at Japanese play lands. I was easily scared but [have] loved those facilities since I was a little child. I always think a movie should [be] an entertaining tool. My policy of making movies is to surprise and entertain the people at the same time. (qtd. in Brown)

So what, then, do Iguchi’s tools and influences offer to ideas that *Machine Girl* is merely a joke or merely entertainment? From the perspective of sexual and disability/bodily exploitation, the film draws almost exclusively on the violent spectacle and shock value that disrupting stable and able ideas and imaginaries of the body’s normative container (even as prop) can achieve. Beyond its gore, the film offers an at-times supportive, empowering onscreen female relationship between Ami and Miki – through their shared grief in losing family members – from training together (like much of the film, a send up of serious martial arts films) to an extensive final battle that features Miki wielding a chainsaw. In equal measure, hyperbolic characterizations of bullying as/and organized crime match or exceed the protagonists’ absurdly violent response to it.

Exemplary in this regard is a flash-forward that takes place after the film’s narrative end – after a bloodied Ami decides not to fall on her sword as redemption for her numerous killings. It is perhaps after being thanked by a few rescued schoolboys who were used as human shields by the head bully, teenage yakuza boss (electrocuted in a bizarre twist of his mother’s malfunctioning drill bra and the hostages’ urine), that Ami declines the same end as her parents, who, we are told early on, committed suicide after being framed for murder. Apparently pleased with his sister’s work, the film’s final scene also brings the smiling, clapping, sunlit apparition of her murdered brother, Yu. His bullying, extortion and murder (along with his best friend, Takeshi) at the hands of the junior yakuza’s gang, provides the motive for her revenge and the film’s central narrative. The flash-forward frames a male student in the midst of a William Tell routine in an abandoned concrete building. In a tame visual metaphor for the scenes to follow, he holds an apple – pierced by a bully’s knife – atop his head. While the other high-school thugs await their turns Ami shouts an off-screen imperative for the bullies to “cut it out.” When confronted, she comes into view with her left arm tucked conspicuously
behind her back. Flashing a picture of her little brother, she holds them all responsible for his death. Her intimidating behaviour is, predictably, along with many problematics of the misogynistic genre exploitation/shock film, met with a comment of “crazy bitch.”

Ami’s swift response brings a slow-motion leap, dissonant sounds and a quick slicing off of the commenter’s hand. Excessive screams and fake blood abound, as Ami reframes ideas of male-dominance on her hyper-powered terms of disablement to yell, “Oh stop screaming. You’re a man aren’t you? You’re not gonna die just because you got your hand chopped off. You see?” And with a wooshing sound (like the foley from a Kung Fu move), Ami thrusts her CGI’d stump into view and shouts, “I only have one arm too!”

And, as narrative often works against its own declarations, predictably, Ami’s interlocutor dies, though not from his now-absent arm, rather from her prosthetic one.

From a disability studies perspective, such a message is disturbing and promising – if quickly undone. Problematic violence aside for a moment, Iguchi empowers Ami (albeit via a CGI’d stump) without her prosthetic. More importantly, Ami’s comment and bold foregrounding of her amputation challenges (artistically and narratively) Seltzer’s notion of the double-logic of prosthesis and the agency that disappears with a missing limb and the impulse to make whole as agency. Like Musetto’s reading, efilm critic Jay Seaver’s favourable take on the film reveals how normative narrative ideology and misogynistic expectations fulfill the genre. He writes: “the entire cast winds up revenge-obsessed killers, none of them seeming to ever stop for a second and think, wait, this is not how civilized people handle their problems. The rationale for considering Ami the movie’s heroine is basically [because] ‘th[ere yakuza] started it’.”

What I find interesting about Seaver’s critique of Iguchi’s “ridiculous” film here is a desire to “civilize” and normalize characters’ behaviour given the movie’s excessive, and unsettling premise while also implying Ami’s unsuitability for success as a female character in such a fictional space. He also wonders why, given some of Iguchi’s other movies, he couldn’t find a way to “get more T&A into the film.” Seaver makes one brief mention of Ami’s machine gun, which furthers her troubling dominance throughout most of the film – and its rationale – as problematic. Not surprisingly perhaps, Seaver fails to expose even the most obvious of observations in the film by seeking normative outcomes or behaviours and disavowing non-normative physicalities, even when Ami’s prosthesis drives the entire narrative. Do stereotypes of ability, sexuality and gender roles in film limit suspension of disbelief in ways that CGI, props and special effects do
not? In what ways can excessive representations of disability and the body lessen (or reinforce) normative (narrative) expectations?

Left to right: images of heroines Ami Hyuga (Minase Yashiro) from *The Machine Girl* and Cherry Darling (Rose McGowan) from *Planet Terror* and the starring role of weaponized prosthetics as part of sexualized characters. The films were released in North America within a year of each other and marked a brief resurgence of the grindhouse genre – with disabled twists that are difficult to miss.

Prior to one of the final climactic scenes in Robert Rodriguez’s film, former go-go dancer Cherry Darling (Rose McGowan) blasts herself over the wall of a military compound (that housed a deliberately leaked zombie-causing toxic agent, “Planet Terror”), to allow her fellow survivors of a zombie apocalypse (of sorts) to get to nearby helicopters. Before she clears the wall with the help of her high-powered prosthetic machine-gun-and-grenade-launcher, of course, her love interest, co-hero and co-sharpshooter of the film, Wray/El Wray (Freddy Rodríguez) says “Cherry Darling, it’s all you.” And, for the purposes of the film’s narrative – and the role(s)/reliance of prosthesis to achieve wholeness and closure – Wray’s inspirational comment is correct on several levels. Though he dies on the tarmac (after being shot by a zombie who was about to shoot Cherry – a filmic safety reminder for her to not revel in the amazing explosions she’s responsible for, perhaps), he, as a sharp shooter who “never miss[es],” pats her belly. This gesture contextualizes their earlier sex scene, only witnessed by the audience in flashes amidst melting film in the projector, quickly subsumed by a humorous and well placed “missing reel” title, in reproductive terms. True to sexual innuendo and viewer imagination, the film closes with Cherry, on a white horse, leading “the lost and the weary” to Mexico with a baby girl on her back and a multi-barreled machine gun for a prosthesis – protecting the way forward to a new, zombie-free utopia.
As critic Javier Martinez avers, “Cherry’s body dominates the film” (333). This is significant given that it features and exploits many performative aspects of bodies, whether dancing, fighting, turning into – or being torn apart by – zombies. From Cherry’s dancing at the local go-go bar, to an increasingly chaotic local hospital, the visceral, and viscera of the body (much like Machine Girl, in a far-less camp way with more fleshed out characters and a bigger budget) provides much material for story. Rodriguez’s film often privileges a dominant heterosexual male gaze and audience by focusing upon Cherry’s legs during her onstage routine and again while she washes blood from her leg after receiving a cut while diving out of the way of an oncoming car. The camera’s objectification of Cherry’s legs in this way fetishizes and sexualizes them while also foreshadowing their wholeness as a precarious, temporary state for the prosthetics to come. The film’s privileging of whole legs as beautiful and ideal prior to the violent removal/cannibalization of one of them aligns ablebodiedness and heteronormativity while also generating space for the eventual (clichéd) revenge narrative to take place. Additionally, the graphic consumption of her leg by a few “psychos” (as Wray later tells the doctor) posits the zombies as militaristic biopower gone awry, whose non-normative actions imply a non-normative response. From a theoretical perspective, such manufactured tension leaves few options other than (as Longmore might suggest), Cherry avenging those responsible for her injury while later placing her in a position of compulsory overachievement as a disabled character – where sheer fascination of spectacle arguably subsumes viewer unease with her new physicality. Largely achieved via her excessive prosthetic limb/gun, in terms of sociotextual inequity, such possibilities of identification are quite far removed from those who use prosthetics as prosthetics.

Cherry’s body dominates in ways that fetishize (like Ami’s continuous wearing of a school uniform, for example) her embodiment as both an able-bodied dancer and recent amputee. After injuring her leg she walks away with a limp and offers a “do I look okay to you?” comment to an inquiring passerby. She eventually makes it to “The Bone Shack,” a neon-signed barbeque joint on the brink of going out of business (which later acts as the film’s central gathering spot to strategize about cars and guns and how to deal with the zombies). Here she meets Wray, with whom she shares a romantic past. Though neither character is entirely clear about their profession in the film, Cherry does reveal, dryly, she wants to be a stand-up comedian – a comment that predictably becomes an able-bodied joke threaded throughout. Their meeting precipitates their car accident – where Cherry loses her leg – not from the crash, but from zombies who pull
her out of the car (into the perpetual greenish haze that lights the outdoor scenes in the film) and consume her. Wray fends off the zombies to reveal Cherry’s new physical state. In the next scene, Cherry is in a hospital bed. She pulls back the sheet to reveal her swaddled stump with a small square metal peg or bolt attached to the end. After sounds of her holding back vomit, she starts to cry. Her tears very deliberately etch the layers of makeup on her face, as a sort of double reveal of a new vulnerability with her new physicality within a film where most characters’ skin bubbles up with terrifying results. She does, however, from the perspective of narrative time, come to terms with her phantom limb\textsuperscript{161} and new, disabled ontology rather quickly. This inequitable “miracle” reinforces an immediate normative narrative requirement for a prosthesis so that the film’s narrative continues.

After battling his way into the hospital, Wray notices a single boot of Cherry’s in the hall, signifying her location and more importantly her newly disabled body. He removes the sheet that now covers her head – presumably to hide from the danger outside the door – and the following dialogue ensues:

Wray: Get up. We’re leaving.
Cherry: I can’t walk.
Wray: So what? Get up. Get up!
Cherry: Motherfucker. Look at me. Look at me! I was gonna be a stand up comedian, but who’s gonna laugh now?
Wray: Some of the best jokes are about cripples. Let’s go–
Cherry: It’s not funny. It’s pathetic.
Wray: Would you stop crying over fucking . . . spilt milk?
Cherry: I have no leg! [Wray breaks off a nearby table leg and jams it into the base of her stump, she grunts slightly]
Wray: Now you do. What do you think?
[Now they are walking briskly down the hospital corridor, arm in arm]
Cherry: You could carry me, Wray?
Wray: You never wanted that before. Why start now? (Planet Terror)

Though their exchange is somewhat forced and obtuse, and includes Wray’s predictably uneasy double take at Cherry’s swaddling, it suits the narrative’s pressures of immediate danger, normative outcome, while at the same time suspending our disbelief. From this point on, however (as in Machine Girl), Cherry’s prostheses (which endure a rapid, militaristic shift from table leg to Gatling gun/rocket launcher) motivate the entire film. In terms of on-screen physicality and of narrative perspective, the story and its multivalent prostheses refuse to keep her convalescing for long – a point their dialogue plays up with a mix of comical understatement and urgency. Having your leg stolen by zombies is

\textsuperscript{161} Oliver Sacks’s \textit{A Leg to Stand on} shares several “case studies” of phantom limb experiences.
certainly more than crying over spilt milk; however, without physically moving from the under-siege hospital, we are inclined to believe Cherry and Wray will become zombies themselves. The prosthesis is a compulsory enabler – a bootstrap prosthesis – that drives the narrative and privileges work-ability.

I also think both films to some extent fulfill (and exceed) Willis’s idea of the prosthesis as artifice—specifically his query “How can one place a limit on the play of artifice?” (Wills 143). Likewise, the films also encapsulate Wigley’s idea that with prosthesis “The body itself becomes artifice” (Jain 38). In other words, the prosthesis takes a starring role in changing the body’s capabilities. In the fictional, filmic domain does this present a new application for aesthetics and representations of disability in/as art? What are the side-effects of such “special effects” in the context of disability culture and experience, for example? Reconsidering Davis’s idea that disability takes up the space the body must not occupy, what space does the prosthesis occupy? As unrealistic as Cherry’s fictional experiences are, the prosthesis occupies the often-negative physical, social and medical space of disability. This process, paradoxically, fulfills her (ultra)disabled, empowering experiences as a character, while providing excesses of stylized spectacle for presumably normative audiences. Even though this process is highly problematic, and aware of itself as such (Cherry as the physical material of the best joke material, for example), the above scene refuses sympathy and pity while forcing its narrative of ability onscreen.

After all, most characters who lose limbs in zombie or gangster films don’t get much more screen time. The bolt at the base of Cherry’s stump, which Martinez calls (via prosthetic extension) a “rod,” allows for a more sexualized prosthetic discourse to “support” the film. Somewhat obviously, given the role prostheses play in motivating the narrative, he notes:

this device seems necessary to advance the plot. How else will the machine gun attach? But why include this plot device that will rationalise one absurdity among so many others? The stump with the protruding rod becomes Cherry’s main interface to the world around her, especially in her relationship with Wray, who on two occasions thrusts onto her stump a prosthetic device: first a chair leg and later a modified machine gun he has made especially for her. Cherry’s reaction as the prostheses attach is on both occasions sexualized – her expressions and sounds mark a kind of intercourse. It can be argued that the two lovers make their deepest physical and psychic connection only when there is a prosthetic involved. (333)

Martinez’s observations, following from Jain’s early articulations regarding the problems of prosthesis “theories” that do not consider more fully the people who are shaped by
them and vice-versa, reveal a couple of convenient assumptions – even as fictional representations: in terms of a fetishized object/relationship of curiosity, the stump/prosthesis relationship becomes a focal (if illogical) detail (given what else we are supposed to believe in the film). From an entertainment-value point of view, however, Cherry is the star of the show and viewers are cued to be most interested in her status – especially given the film’s earlier focus on her legs. Martinez’s thinking through the small peg/bolt as a more sexually and visually protruding “rod” does enable his intercourse theory. Recalling that Cherry and Wray actually do have non-prosthetic sex in the film, we might ask why Martinez’s theory also chooses to “rationalize one absurdity among so many others,” when in fact many people who use prosthetic legs beyond the screen have a pin or peg interface? Wray’s earlier disavowal of disability’s dominance in the visual field – with his I-can’t-look-but-I’ll-look behaviour – also re-inscribes Cherry’s stump as uneasy spectacle, as a space that once again must be filled for normative narrative reasons. The resulting disability aesthetic helps the film succeed by playing up ideas of what a prosthesis should look like and achieve. With the temptation of suggesting Martinez reads too much into such an eventually excessive prosthetic, Cherry’s “protruding rod” might be better thought of as an interface helping her to walk, escape zombies, etc., rather than such an over-determined device or “main interface to the world around her” – which assumes, in ableist fashion that, without it, she does not exist or cannot communicate. Martinez also observes: “If at first Cherry is portrayed as a hyper-sexualized object, her sexuality becomes increasingly muted even as the film focuses on her augmented form” (334). Here, a normative assumption of assistive technology (however augmented) for an amputee assumes a desexualized status because the film focuses on her prosthesis and its accumulative metaphorical weight. Even so, I believe her sexuality remains in the foreground as she wears her dancer’s uniform throughout the film, and, in spite of her threatening prosthetic, she goes out of her way to perform a backward crab pose – silhouetted by the massive explosions she causes to allow the group’s escape. But, really, who wants to have sex with an amputee, right?

As a final moment of discussion in *Planet Terror*, I wish to analyze the pervasive thread of compulsory ability in the form of “standing up” that manifests as a physical requirement for Cherry’s comedic aspirations, which the film cleverly (if discreetly) wraps into its able-disabled resolution. While escaping from the military compound, Wray gives Cherry a machine gun prosthetic that he’s (somehow) been working on (like Miki’s
husband on Ami’s prosthetic in *Machine Girl*) for her. As he attaches it to her he says (as ominous tones mix with Spanish guitar), in near evangelical fashion, “I need you to become who you’re meant to be. Stand!” Not surprisingly, Cherry is a quick study and is able to decimate, in a kind of burlesque barrage, any zombie or enemy in her path—though it is unclear, as with Ami’s device, how she actually fires it.

Such representation certainly resists the originary intent of medical prosthetics insofar as they “help and imitate nature” (Paré qtd. in Wills 243). But nature, and what is “natural,” is also a construction. While not to take away from the deliberately spectacular homage to a past genre of films, *Planet Terror* (and its companion *Death Proof*) often digitally destabilizes and degrades the stability of the film (via scratchy, at times melting frames and slipping soundtracks), as if the natural elements and time have conspired to create this worn-down, nostalgic aesthetic. As Cameron notes, “[*Planet Terror*] constantly foregrounds the materiality of traditional cinema as cinema and connects it with the deterioration of zombie flesh” (84). The film, its biopolitical content and commentary act as digital prosthetics. Digital effects throughout imitate analog film and create a longing for a “lost” era to allow our cultural imaginary to reinstat[e] a normative history of people’s interactions with old technology. Similarly, the imposition of new CGI and digital technology in a multivalent prosthetic fashion with Cherry’s character and her transformation during the course of the film enables a coming to terms with her new ontology as a technologically enhanced post-body.

This idea becomes important in a larger sociocultural, economic and biopolitical discourse of ability and narrative as it governs the body. These films, most notably Cherry Darling’s character, hinge their success on the physical material of disability for/as magnetic spectacle (like the institution of the freakshow in *Freaks*) and as textual element (joke) to sustain their narratives. While such embodiments and writerly choices might seem innocuous, the biopolitical roots of these artistic (and playful for Rodriguez and Iguchi) moves stem from similar “stand up” imperatives of near-religious fervour. As Herschbach outlines in her article “Prosthetic Reconstruction,” it became a national (American) cultural and economic project, following the Civil War—and contemporary with the rise of eugenics and constructions of normalcy in dominant discourse—to convince people (mostly soldiers) who had lost a leg, for example, to achieve, contribute economically and normalize socially and physically via a prosthesis. He writes that the burgeoning industry “drew on evangelical idioms that had proved so effective in getting volunteers to serve, casting their sacrifice as heroic and indispensable to the moral,
political and military triumph of the Union,” noting that “Limb manufacturers participated wholeheartedly in this spectacle” (28). As Davis suggests, invoking ideas of valid citizenry via ablenationalism, such companies were motivated to “restor[e] the limbs of soldiers who had given part of their bodies so that their country’s body would remain whole and undivided” (“Stumped by Genes” 93). The echo (at least in our modern era – as Carole Poore’s observations above also indicate) of an imperative post-war rehabilitative process (and less so following other wars and soldiers returning home to smaller markets) that takes hold as normalcy becomes an enforced outcome of a massive prosthetic limb industry eventually sensationalized in a grindhouse movie named Planet Terror is, I believe, no coincidence. Do zombies in Rodriguez’s film signify the literal meat-grinder of mass industrialized/mechanized reproduction in this respect? The pervasive economic imperative in the film appears in the decomposition of so many bodies onscreen and coincides with the aestheticization of a film in decomposition to mark an artistic lament for a grindhouse genre of limited profitability. Does grindhouse, like the disabled body, resist normative ideas of productivity? In similar salesperson-type terms, Allan Cameron writes: “bodies in general are vulnerable to amputation, mutilation and decomposition” (84). Though writing about Rodriguez’s film, Cameron’s phrase has a ring to it of a body as product in need of support, which, as numerous conflicts would

162 In Claiming Disability Simi Linton discusses: oral history conducted with disabled Canadian World War II veterans and other disabled people [and the] transition from hospital-style wicker wheelchairs used to transport patients to self-propelled, lighter-weight, folding chairs that were provided to disabled people, mostly to veterans, in the years following the war. Prior to the new chairs, one man recalls that “one was often confined to bed for long periods of time . . . There were a few cerebral palsy chaps there . . . If they transgressed any rule . . . they’d take their wheelchairs away from them and leave them in bed for two weeks.” In this and other interviews the value of wheelchairs is revealed. A vet described how the medical staff’s efforts were geared towards getting veterans to walk with crutches, but when the vets discovered the self-propelled chairs they realized “it didn’t make much sense spending all that energy covering a short distance [on crutches] . . . when you could do it quickly and easily with a wheelchair . . . It didn’t take long for people to get over the idea that walking was that essential.” Another veteran recalled how the staff’s emphasis on getting the men to walk “delayed our rehabilitation for months and months.” The staff obviously understood the value of the wheelchair to disabled people; otherwise they would not have used it as a means of control, yet they resisted purchasing the new self-push chairs for some time after they were made available. It is that type of manipulation and control, along with architectural and attitudinal barriers, that confine people. It is not wheelchairs. (Tremblay, qtd. in 27).

163 Not surprisingly, perhaps, Grindhouse did not succeed at the box office.
indicate, the prosthetic industry continues to keep alive and well,\textsuperscript{164} even helping it to become more affordable – perhaps in China as well.

**Stumped for a Good Answer: Do You Want My Limb or Me?**

“The analogies continue as one is foiled by the tripping on a stump and then comes to be stumped by the difficulty of the tree and by the stomping sound made by the stump leg, which combines the fleshy stump with the wooden stump.” (Davis, “Stumped By Genes” 92)

“Its presence reverberates around the house and invades the son’s sleeping and waking hours.” (Reichardt, “Prosthesis” 450)

“We’re legally crippled. It’s the death of love.” (David Bowie, “Up the Hill Backwards”)

My biopolitical critique of the films above and their prosthetic employment/representation helps to establish the importance of the literal prosthesis to narrative and the figurative determinism that somehow resides within the prosthetic. The result of the process creates, maintains and reinforces sociotextual inequities in the form of unrealistic expectations, assumptions and meanings upon disabled people, their experiences and assistive technologies, while simultaneously reaffirming belief systems that suggest people with disabilities exist as a lesson in humility for an ablebodied status quo. I do not mean to generate undue sympathy for a disability studies reading of Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” (1955), her character(s), and story that follows shortly; after all, as Garland-Thomson notes, “if Hulga Hopewell were pretty, cheerful and one-legged instead of ugly and bitter, ‘Good Country People’ would fail” (Extraordinary Bodies 12). Within a context of carrying the “rhetorical potency of the stigma” (12), however, similar to the way a change in a person’s name might change our understanding or feeling of that person, Hulga’s disabilities take on additional meaning. In doing so, a fictional character’s prosthesis assumes and embodies figurative agency well beyond itself. Further, the economic underpinnings of prosthetics that I establish in this chapter perpetuate the notion of the body as product in need of support – in need of wholeness. Similar to Wray’s evangelical imperative for Cherry to “stand up” on behalf of her frightened evacuees, Sun Jifa must work to provide for his family. As I explore in

\textsuperscript{164} Herschbach mentions, “As Appleton’s Journal noted in 1875, ‘Some connoisseurs have collections of legs – week-day legs, Sunday-legs, dancing-legs, each expressly made for a distinct purpose” (28) – arguably, to sell more legs.
readings of one-legged Joy/Hulga in O’Connor’s story, though the prosthetic enables a wholeness of narrative, it does not enable a wholeness of character. In what figurative and material ways does the prosthetic proselytize our beliefs? While the prosthesis enables attractive female protagonists via CGI a spectacular means of “propping-up” and celebrating a grindhouse genre of film in decline and, of course, saves humanity on various scales, it also, as some criticism suggests, marks Hulga as an ugly character whose academic hubris is no match a salt-of-the-earth-type criminal who steals her wooden leg as a deserving reward of her necessary “salvation” as an amputee. The prosthetic generates significant range of ableist, heteronormative and “spiritual” excess in narrative that works against the materiality and experiences of the bodies that use them. If, as Wills suggests, the prosthesis is a “contrived conjunction of difference” (269), then its capability in co-opting fantasies of film and fiction – as special effect or religious affect – suits the overdeterminism that often follows and provides a useful way to intervene in the often-binaristic roles disability plays in general. For Joy/Hulga, disability (prosthetic or otherwise) acts as a singular metaphor (she is spiritually incomplete) or a materialist universal (we are all incomplete in some ways). I believe both readings do equal violence to the different, historically/culturally contingent lived experiences of disabled people, for whom a prosthetic, for example, is both a part of and not the sum of their subjectivity.

Early in O’Connor’s tale, her shrewd narrator reveals a value-laden construction of disability as a choice (something I discuss in my first chapter in relation to dominant criticism of Beckett’s characters) for the story’s main character Joy Hopewell, “a large blonde girl who had an artificial leg” (551). O’Connor writes: “Joy, whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face, would stare just a little to the side of her, her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who had achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it” (552). Given the limited narrative space of a short story, O’Connor’s characterizations of Joy also work extensively to limit representations of disability to unflattering ends. A little further on we are told “The doctors had told Mrs. Hopewell that with the best of care, Joy might see forty-five. She had a weak heart” (554). From fairly early on in the tale, for the mostly omniscient narrator at least, Joy’s demeanor contravenes the feelings her moniker invokes. More interestingly, perhaps, is

\[165\] The narrator is omniscient at every point except when Manley Pointer and Joy/Hulga are outside making plans for their infamous encounter the next day (557-8) – out of earshot of Mrs. Hopewell.
what the vagaries of “constant outrage,” “an act of will” and “the doctors” invoke in constructing a certain kind of disabled experience. Again, in short narrative time we learn that Joy is an expressionless character who uses a prosthetic limb and appears as though she has purposely blinded herself (something that, for example, the preacher character does to himself in O’Connor’s novella Wise Blood in order to be more convincing at his job). Moreover, she has no desire to shift to a sunnier, more joyous disposition even if she lives long enough, presumably.

We also learn that Joy, now 32, had her leg “literally blasted off” (554) in a hunting accident when she was ten. Later, while a philosophy student at university, she changes her name to Hulga – a name Mrs. Hopewell thinks her daughter chose because it seemed the “ugliest name in any language,” reminiscent of “the broad blank hull of a battleship” (553). After completing her PhD Hulga returns home, a career cut short, of course, by her aforementioned weak heart. In this story of numerous gazes and “steely-eyed” stares, other characters also contribute to the spoken-for notion of spectacle that can come with disabled embodiment and other curiosities. The narrator notices Mrs. Hopewell’s maid’s perplexities to Joy’s differences:

Something about her seemed to fascinate Mrs. Freeman and then one day Hulga realized that it was the artificial leg. Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable. (553)

Akin to the subject matter of reality TV, or a then-contemporary, but culturally waning freakshow, Mrs. Freeman – the mother of two typically-bodied, less educated, “fine girls” (558), Glynese and Carramae – offers a humorous, suitable aside, given this story’s catalogue of spectacle. Hulga’s prosthetic serves as the narrative’s uneasy focal point, ironically as a physical part of a character seemingly unwilling to participate in the story itself. O’Connor writes: “When Hulga stumped into the kitchen in the morning (she could walk without making the awful noise but she made it—Mrs. Hopewell was certain—because it was ugly-sounding), she glanced at them and did not speak” (554). In some ways, then, Mrs. Freeman’s, the narrator’s, and our own interest in the “ugly sounding,” “stump[ing]” prosthetic we have been directed to gawk at, or imagine, motivates the story’s pacing and action, and eventually Hulga’s artificial limb becomes the most important aspect of the story.

The arrival of blue-suited, large-briefcase-holding, Manley Pointer, a persistent, if likeable “salt of the earth” (556) Bible salesman who talks his way into being a dinner guest, sets up heteronormative tension in the story between himself and Hulga (we also
know that Mrs. Freeman’s “fine girls” – Glynese, who likes boys who drive certain kinds of cars, and Carramae, who is pregnant at 15 – exist in contrast to Hulga who has “never danced a step or had any normal good times” (553)). The narrative works to align Hulga and Manley, as he too has a “heart condition [and] may not live long” (557). Though she does not answer any of his conversation during dinner and loathes his “inferior mind” (560), apparently they manage to plan a rendezvous the next day. Their journey reveals a sense of her “pity” for him, differing views on religion, and a noticeably lighter valise carried by Manley; they eventually share a kiss. Hulga, replete with a rare smile, says, in another moment of foreshadowing, “In my economy [. . .] I am saved and you are damned but I told you I didn’t believe in God” (561). Ironically, her “economy,” either as an atheist and/or as someone with a disability, plays into the use of her representation to justify divine understandings and “saving” of disability. When they reach the ladder to the barn’s loft Manley couches his trickery within an ableist assumption/lament, “It’s too bad we can’t go up there.” As Hulga asks, “Why can’t we?,” Manley responds, “Yer leg” (561-2). Hulga manages the ladder with ease and after some awkwardly intimate exchanges Manley whispers his object of attention in Hulga’s ear, “Show me where your wooden leg joins on.” According to the narrator, “she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul” (563). Even within such determined, “precious” constraints, and the protests of Manley, Hulga’s uneasiness dissipates as she asks, “Why do you want to see it?” After “a long penetrating look,” Manley says her uniqueness is what motivates him: “it’s what makes you different. You ain’t like anybody else.” The narrator continues:

> Very gently he began to roll the slack leg up. The artificial limb, in a white sock and a brown flat shoe, was bound in a heavy material like canvas and ended in an ugly jointure where it was attached to the stump. The boy’s face and his voice were entirely reverent as he uncovered it and said, ‘Now show me how to take it off and on.’ (O’Connor 563)

While O’Connor’s climactic reveal is unique in terms of literary embodiment, the “ugly jointure,” where the prosthetic meets body, is anything but sensual (certainly less

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166 Evans article, “CUT! . . . Flannery O’Connor’s Apotemnophilic Allegories,” provides some context and experiences of seldom discussed apotemophilia, where a person desires the removal of a limb (apparently, disturbingly criticized by some in the disability community as a “wannabe”) to feel more whole. He writes, “While a few only require the removal of a finger or toe, the most common request is the amputation of the left leg above the knee. Corinne, asked where her body should end [during a case study], replied. ‘Sort of high up the thigh. Perhaps higher. Legs in any form are not something that feel a part of me’ (qtd in Evans 306). Such ontology lends new consideration to Beckett’s uneasy Murphy and his body parts “fidgeting to be off.”
sexualized than the focus on Cherry’s “rod” in Planet Terror, for example) and asserts the same negative qualities of disabled experience that Mrs. Hopewell associates with the name Hulga and her “attitude” (553). More disempowering, perhaps, is the patriarchal impulse that subsumes Hulga’s desires – if briefly. O’Connor writes: “She was thinking that she would run away with him and that every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again. ‘Put it back on,’ she said” (563). Though fleeting, hints of interdependence disappear with or without her prosthetic limb, as apparently, “Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him” (563). Hulga’s desire to have her leg returned erases any possibility of intimacy, making Manley’s “You got me instead” attempt to sway Hulga and create a ‘mood’ appear forced. He opens his case to reveal the clichéd materials of a fraudster, and, in addition to two intact Bibles, from a hollowed–out one arrives risqué playing cards, a condom and a flask of whiskey that he offers to no avail. Tensions increase rather quickly, leading Manley to sweep his gear away – along with Hulga’s wooden leg, which she soon notices is in the valise, flanked by Bibles (564). O’Connor writes, “When all of him had passed but his head, he turned and regarded her with a look that no longer had any admiration in it. ‘I’ve gotten a lot of interesting things,’ he said. ‘One time I got a woman’s glass eye this way. And you needn’t to think you’ll catch me because Pointer ain’t really my name’” (564). The story thrives on false identity here. Problematically, Manley is once again aligned with Hulga, (who, for her mother is always “Joy”) callously this time, and as the victim of an elaborate scam.

Somewhat, the leg resists the narrative’s heteronormative impulses as much as some theorists wish to assert them. Evans suggests, “In a sense, one might argue that the ‘tall gaunt’ Manley is none other than Hulga’s missing limb,” which Evans considers a phallocentric “third leg,” allowing “Pointer [to be] the replacement of the replacement, Hulga’s natural leg uncannily returned and impatiently demanding reinsertion in her body” (323). While Hulga’s supposed “demands” are never articulated, Evans’s theoretical prosthetic subsumes female agency as male, while devaluing, desexualizing and erasing disability, and its prosthetics as altogether “unnatural,” ironically, via a man-made process. Given such troubled logic, why must the “insertion” of a prosthesis of heteronormativity result in making her female body whole? Insisting upon being disabled and being female as lack also feminizes Davis’s idea that disability takes up the space

Evans places a similar desire upon Hulga’s experiences, suggesting, “it is not wrong to say her impairment is now desired” (320).
the body must not occupy – here refigured as a space of colonizing sexual aggression complete with the theft of the object of spectacle, or treasure. Manley does not have sex with Hulga (as the story disavows her sexuality), but his morality act plays out just enough to leave Hulga and her “churning face” (565) alone in the loft, embarrassed and apparently helpless “in a place that literally occupies higher ground” (Markotic 5). Upon the prospect of Hulga and Manley having sex, Behling suggests, “She so much loses her sense of caution that she willingly climbs into a hayloft with him” (92). Do “traditional” values insist upon traditional bodies? The possibilities that Belluso speaks of and writes of or the Femmegimp politics and practices of Loree Erickson – spaces of disability as sensual and celebratory – certainly frame Hulga’s within an antiquated space of embodiment. Imagine, a disabled person wanting to have sex?

Back at the house Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman remark on the simplicity they observe of Manley as he saunters from view to close out the story. Their (and Joy/Hulga’s) “reading” of him is entirely wrong. In some respects, the simplicity of disability’s employment in the story – so heavily signed – or, rather, the simplicity with which some critics view it, is similarly perilous in avoiding alternative readings beyond obvious, dominant ones. Put more forcefully, Markotic suggests, “O’Connor’s short story, however, does far more than simply present a joke in bad taste by letting the wooden leg accumulate meaning [suggesting] we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to her wooden leg” (5). The “joke” of course (similar to the one that runs through Planet Terror and Cherry’s aspirations as a stand-up comedian) is that Hulga was not intelligent enough – in spite of her “education” – to catch on to Manley’s tricks. As a result, she pays in her “economy” for being grumpy, gullible and certainly not a good person.

Similar to Martinez’s prosthetic intercourse reading of Cherry and Wray’s relationship, Hulga’s wooden leg (and its theft) also takes on divine, overdeterministic proportions for some. O’Connor herself\textsuperscript{167} suggests, “If you want to say that the wooden leg is a symbol, you can say that. But it is a wooden leg first, and as a wooden leg it is absolutely necessary to the story” (“Writing Short Stories” 832). Here lies the paradox of the prosthesis in fiction and fact. Where an artificial limb can be just that, its presence dimensionalizes narrative and/as lived experiences in ways that are not absolute or

\textsuperscript{167} In Narrative Prosthesis, Mitchell and Snyder mention how Kenzaburo Oe “as the father of an autistic son, reclaims the work [and letters] of Flannery O’Connor as a disabled author who wrote eloquently out of her own experience of lupus” (33).
necessary and devalue those lived experiences in the process. What is more necessary, a wooden leg or a symbol? Either way, O’Connor’s narrative places disability in a role that lacks agency and empowerment while disavowing the material conditions of the body. Akin to my caveat in the title of my theory section, “proselytizing the prosthetic,” I believe Hulga’s stolen prosthesis – flanked by Bibles – indicates some of the dominant discourse that follows understandings of disability, Hulga’s role, and the prosthetic in the story.

As a means to close out this chapter, I will unpack a couple of examples of this phenomenon in order to illustrate the necessity of literary disability studies as a means to rectify sociotextual inequity. In “The Necessity of Disability” Laura Behling generalizes about the role of disability in O’Connor’s work and perhaps beyond:

these characters need to exist as they are so that the truth can be revealed: that physically whole bodies are just as problematic, perhaps even more so, just as fragmented and chaotic, just as alienated and distant, as the disabled body is believed to be. In short, the disabled body is the modern mirror in which humanity is recognized as hurtling toward ruin and impersonality amidst utter confusion about what makes humanity human. (89)

She continues in a divine erasure of the material of fictional disability through extended metaphor to mean something for the rest of us: “The missing leg and prosthesis are all about belief, are manifestations of Hulga’s theology of ‘Nothing’. Hulga’s corporeal disintegrity is her God and, as a result, places Hulga squarely in the position of the most aware character of the modern condition” (92). Considering Hulga’s character “just as” or less disabled than the rest of us denies disabled experiences and attention to inequities in the same way that phases like ‘we are all disabled’ do. As applied to the prosthetic, Evans materializes ideas in O’Connor’s story in terms of our “material bod[ies being] tired, sore, broken in places, losing something every day.” Problematically (if not predictably), he suggests these bodily shifts “constanly remin[d] us [that] we are always, in a sense, amputated from the beginning” (326). And the phrase “in some sense” becomes key. Amputated in what ways? Metaphically? Psychically? Like fictional Hulga or innovative farmer Sun Jifa? Surely it must be easier to claim amputation, or disability in a figurative sense, then to actually embody and live it, right? Behling’s making of Hulga into a potent embodiment of an equally enigmatic “modern condition” (perhaps under the same set of theoretical constraints as Beckett’s Murphy) has her occupying a space of “ruin” that “we” are all getting sucked toward. If in fact (even as fiction) she is disabled (she may, after all, just believe she is), this illustrates how the
substance of disabled experience is appropriated, abstracted and extended – in prosthetic, make-whole fashion – to cathartic significance of socio-religious ideology.

My final exposure of sociotextual inequity in this chapter challenges another example of understanding the role of disability in O’Connor’s fiction “properly.” Lisa Oliverio suggests a universal “we” understands that Hulga’s disability serves to “transform the readers’ souls not on the distancing of the ‘freak’ of disability as some radical other but rather on the recognition of the spiritual brokenness that the figure [Joy/Hulga] causes us to recognize in ourselves. The disabled figure presents a mirror for all of humanity spiritual brokenness in a fallen world [sic]” (2). Through such a totalizing lens, how could anyone who is disabled (or an ally) have a problem with such a “truthful” reading, especially when up against “all of humanity” as a sort of broken relief reflecting upon itself in a spectacle for all to learn from? O’Connor also reveals that the story’s twist of Manley’s theft of Hulga’s wooden leg brings an obvious “shock for the reader” (832). In similar ways, then, given the story’s investiture in the significance of a prosthetic limb and the rift/shock of its removal and disappearance, the fact that the story resolves in the absence of a body part motivates (akin to prosthetic thinking) any ends to theorize a whole body (and story) again – if not through Hulga, then through a normative god-fearing reader. This “shock” to ideas of ablebodied stability maintains figurative importance in the dominant cultural imaginary, thus privileging ideology over experience – all based upon an author’s perceptions of a disabled character. Despite all that figures of disability achieve and figure into, why does so much depend upon a leg, or upon its absence?
Conclusion: What Kind of Life is That, or, How Should I Stand Up, Exactly?

“The appropriation of disability, disabled lives, and non-normative bodies for projects unrelated to disability justice demands a critical lens.” (Staff, thefeministwire.com, Aug. 2013, cfp for Forum on Disabilities, Ableism and Disability Studies)

“Current educational discourse and practice still operates on the basis that students’ assimilation with dominant norms is conflated with student success.” (Anika Stafford, UBC, “Contagion and Antidote: Changing Locations of ‘Risk’ in BC Public School’s Discourse on Disability”)

“By confronting people with my naked body, with its softness, its roundness and its threat, I wanted to take control, redress the balance in which media representations of disabled women is usually tragic, always pathetic. I wanted to hold up a mirror to all those people who had stripped me bare previously . . . the general public with their naked stares, and more especially, the medical profession.” (Mary Duffy, qtd. in Nead 88)

In Disability Aesthetics Tobin Siebers asks: “Why do we see representations of disability as having a greater material existence than other aesthetic representations?” (2). Viewing Hulga Hopewell as a “mirror” of human failure, Ami as a revenge-obsessed murderer, and Cherry Darling as a hyper-achieving markswoman who leads pilgrims to a new utopia, inscribes their representations and narratives with excess in various measures. Given the prosthetic thread (or threat) of the preceding chapter, if disability’s figural weight (to borrow from Sun Jifa) promotes an increased material concern for disability, why then is the materiality of disabled bodies in fiction and fact so often devalued? In the same text, Siebers also discusses an understanding of some art “vandalism” as a means to re-inscribe art in the image of disability. It might be possible, then, to consider disability a prosthetic act where addition of its experiences makes whole of its own imperfect social, narrative and artistic bodies. Non-adherence to aesthetic practices that so often imagine a certain type of whole body address/increase the material value of disability, or of bodily absence.

One of the questions I have heard from less-informed others when encountering disability on the street, usually relative to the degree of physical or mental difference, is “What kind of life is that?” More often than not, the last part of the question pitches down (rather than up) to assume an immediate devaluation of that person’s life experience.

168 For example, in 2002, Paul Kelleher managed to remove the head from a statue of Margaret Thatcher in a London gallery. When police arrived he said, “I think it looks better like that” (“Thatcher Statue Attacker Jailed”).
Dominant culture seems to have little problem with representing some of those lives as valuable aesthetic metaphors but has little desire to consider those lives as being materially whole, or valued in the same way. Through the concept of sociotextual inequity, my work attempts to decentralize dominant ideology to privilege equitable perceptions of disability. My reconsiderations of disability in contemporary narrative and culture in this way is important given the majority of people’s encounters with disability occur (at least initially) within stories, films, plays and art.

As I discuss in the previous chapter, overdetermined readings of disability in texts often skew the work’s reception and the representations of disability within the work. Whether Beckett’s “portrait gallery of cripples” (Chabert, qtd. in Maude 11) is genius or not, or a collective emblem of a “modern condition,” I argue that we should spend much more time in the gallery. We should uncover the material conditions that shape Beckett’s disabled characters, and trace their complex, multi-dimensional relevance for disability experience, theory, performance and audiences since. Those multitudes of wonderous cripples, who consistently wring so much meaning towards other ends as the rich bodily material of texts are too-often framed in and beyond pages of books (by authors and theorists alike) as lives of lack or supersaturated symbol, and too often met with violent exclusion and absence. Within such overdeterminism, part of my role as disability theorist is to use literary criticism as a form of social protest. By intervening in problematic narratives of disability – from Francis Galton’s biopolitical pinball machine to Manley Pointer’s newly acquired prosthetic leg – I continue to seek empowering readings of disability as a means of generating agency for its people.

A significant part of my project involves mapping out and bridging representations of disability from literary and cultural disability studies perspectives to seek productive connections to an experiential model of disability. My methodology throughout often involves claiming positive, constructive moments and possibilities from problematic and uneasy textual employments of disability within seldom aligned historical, contemporary and theoretical contexts of disability. In this way, my concept of sociotextual inequity becomes a useful model to articulate and illustrate a range of able, and increasingly socioeconomic, imperatives that govern disability within and outside of our cultural material. If sociotextual inequity illuminates moments where disability’s employment and representation in texts is disproportionate to histories, contemporary experiences and exclusions of disability, it also seeks qualitative features of representations and historical narratives that share moments of recognition, rights and
increased agency. Disability does not suffer from a lack of representation but a surfeit of representations that draw symbol from symbol rather than engage with material experience. By combining a blend of metaphorical readings with those that undo them – like Handke’s Kaspar with Belluso’s Voice Properties, for example – I hope to upend dominant constructions and expectations of communication, performance and embodiment. Doing so provides a theoretical framework for equitable representation and empowerment – to ensure those who identify with and experience disability are valuable and valued in our human narratives and/as experience. My choice of fictional texts, films, and plays, along with an array of contemporary media reports and images that frame disability in various ways, shows the too-often inequitable relationship between the power and pervasiveness of disability’s representations and how – through a lens of sociotextual inequity – the often silent histories of lived disability experience might be reframed in minority discourse.

As hinted at above, my first chapter, “How I Can Go On: The Displeasure of Modernity’s “Murphy” and his Textual Biopower,” provides a paradigm shift for Beckett’s characters as shaped by disabled experience rather than as emblems of a romanticized, modernist genius author to favour bodies over icons. My second chapter, “You Can’t Show That: Freaking Priceless Babies, False Equalities and What Disability Buys on Film,” explores the possibilities and problems around filmic representations and exploitations of disability in Freaks and The Station Agent to argue against an industry-policed, economically driven normalcy. Dinklage’s work both confirms and resists normative roles amidst a range of economic and social tensions that, arguably, given dwarf actor Martin Henderson’s assault, place others like him under threat. Chapter three, “Giving Notice or Being Noticed? Embodiment, Performance and Other Stages of Disability,” as mentioned above, works to upend dominant expectations of communication, embodiment, and experience. The myth of educating control over disorder within a long history of exploiting and objectifying disabled subjects, such as Peter Handke’s historically-informed Kaspar, also reveals a history of corrective ideology as inadequate and unnecessary. Conversely, Belluso’s Voice Properties, and the play’s mediation via assistive – rather than coercive – technology, humanizes experiences of disability for audiences. “What’s Your Sign? Powering the Prosthesis and Disabling Lines of Contemporary Constraint,” my last chapter, asks questions about prosthetic theories and experience to suggest new possibilities of what it means to be whole. The prosthesis’ starring roles in Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” and films The
*Machine Girl* and *Planet Terror* maintain excessive meaning-making for prosthetics and/as identity that my discussion helps undo. The multivalent practical and cultural employment of prosthesis as theory, assistive technology and as real and figurative material makes its own imperfect bodies at work, in narrative, as artifice and in language.

I wish to marshal a challenge to predictable representations of disability, especially when its lived experience is not predictable. Critiquing dominant employments and reiterations of oppressive histories of disability in narrative and popular media allows me to reframe disabled experience as a valuable contributor to human narratives and experience – fantastical and well grounded. At times throughout my dissertation sociotextual inequity operates as a heuristic of sociocultural protest and engagement through writing. As a result, I hope disability’s spatial and historical exclusions become increasingly evident, especially in relation to its often disempowered representations in the vast majority of cultural material – again, the stuff most people, such as students, encounter.

In an expression of the relative “newness” of literary and cultural disability studies and an assertion of its importance, one of my hopes is to realize the study of disability as a key component of (literary) theory courses throughout studies of English, Film and Cultural/Media Studies in Canadian universities. On an international and visually compelling scale, during the 2013 biennale, Venice priest Gianmatteo Caputo’s concerns over the inclusion and physical placement of a 35-foot-tall inflatable replica of British artist Marc Quinn’s 15-tonne marble sculpture, “Alison Lapper Pregnant” (image below), points to a similar necessity for much greater cultural and artistic awareness of the value of disabled representation, experience and embodiment – along with the importance of theory to reveal such issues. Caputo, “responsible for cultural heritage matters for the Venice Patriarchate,” said the statue looked “out of place’ [and that] he was ‘perplexed’ by the decision to place the inflatable figure close to the church [,] ‘removed from the context’ of the bulk of artworks” (Squires). How the priest’s cultural heritage-based idea of “fitting in” differs based upon the feeling or visual impression he gets from Lapper’s (a disabled artist herself) embodiment, then, shows that the work does its job by challenging what “suitable” aesthetics can achieve. More tellingly, Caputo’s unease reflects real institutional resistance to real bodies.
The placement of Quinn’s work next to a church invites a range of sociotextual, historical and experiential tensions around the materiality of disability, as a significant biopolitical gesture for disability: naked, pregnant and possible. Lapper’s larger-than-life figure is significant given the roles for disability in dominant religious discourse – as pitiable site of charity and emblematic of countless moral and physical struggles, etc. Lapper’s materiality shapes “new” possibilities to value disabled experience in its own right. Its representation, literally and deliberately next to sites that maintain disability’s historical oppression, overdeterminism and charitable status reveals ways disability works in culture as an agent of change.

How aesthetic/material contexts play off of each other, in moving from an art historical context to a labour context, are central to my dissertation. Indeed, such contemporary spatial tensions around the location of artwork suggest much more needs to occur for Quinn’s work to be “in place,” and representations of disabled embodiment in general to be at home, arguably, anywhere. On a national scale, issues arise with how to “fit disability in” to Canada’s conservative government’s attempt at representing –

Images of dysfunction: at left, a wheelchair ramp to nowhere, and, at right, a Conservative Party of Canada flyer “supporting jobs for all Canadians.” Similar to the access ramp that leads to a brick wall belying the promise of the disabled parking spots in the foreground, the job ad provides Braille that is unreadable (in that it is not raised) and a “universal” sign for disability, rather than a real person. The arrows of the “economic action plan” sign also point to perilous, incomplete and seemingly inaccessible job sites.
rather than actualizing— an inclusive workforce. Through ideas legislating or constructing whole inclusive workplace spaces or physical access to them, failures occur. Socioeconomic attempts to bring “everyone on board” or “into line” as part of an ongoing project of ablenationalism in Canada, for example, as a seemingly abstract “economic action plan” within deliberate measures of austerity, amount to little more than symbolism without substance. Or, to borrow a phrase from multiculturalism discourse, “parades without power.” As the images above indicate, governmental, and private sector attempts to provide the social architecture for inclusiveness, stop at the sign, on national and local levels, where gestures of access encounter real walls.

This dissertation reflects my desire to (re)inscribe and (re)populate a literary disability theory that is located in histories that necessitate an empowering of disability’s sociocultural and textual values. In spite of cycles of manufactured social panic and economic crises, my practice helps to shift ways of considering how disability figures into and as narrative. While I am pleased that disability is everywhere, Father Caputo reminds us it is not welcome everywhere or by everyone. His objections, while seeking to devalue disabled embodiment and its art, do generate increased awareness of how disability functions socially and culturally by bringing disability in art to a larger audience. Considering peoples’ responses and connections to disability outside the field of disability studies and theory, I echo feminist, crip, queer Alison Kafer, who suggests “finding it in unexpected places, using it to make connections to other social justice movements, and recognizing in it the possibilities of desire. These are, potentially, more accessible futures” (157).

One need only navigate the myriad steps connecting (and getting in the way of) some public spaces at Simon Fraser University to notice its predominant design for the able-walkers among us. Stairs often frame Arthur Erickson’s ivory tower on a mountaintop, signifying a spatial, classical metaphor—that education is a journey and that one has to ‘go down to go up’—with little consideration of how we all might participate in that spatial, physical metaphor as part of the journey of higher education.169

169 The staircase Terry Fox’s statue at SFU is oriented towards was “saved” during a climactic car crash in the Arnold Schwarzenegger film The 6th Day (2000), with funds from the shoot, I believe, going towards infrastructure—in other words, to build a better staircase. Somewhat ironically, the university is currently in the news because of its decaying architecture. According to SFU’s website, “Schwarzenegger drove across the pond (special platforms were constructed after the fish were removed), down the stairs (additional stairs constructed over the existing ones) that
In my capacity as a graduate student and instructor to at least three hundred students since beginning my program of study I have taught one wheelchair-user and seldom notice any students with visible disabilities. Given my profession, research focus, and experience I am inclined to believe we do not all “pass” ourselves off so normally, and given disability’s substantive demographics, how might SFU’s spatial design shape its student body? And how might that affect its academic offerings? Sociocultural space becomes contentious as we consider the following irony (perhaps atop Erickson’s bleached out steps) of space informing who has “equal access” to university education.

In their instructive chapter “Putting Disability in Its Place” Rod Michalko (who is blind) and Tanya Titchkosky recall a telling exchange with a colleague at their university who declares another university in the province “totally accessible” and “equipped to handle handicapped students” (“Putting Disability in Its Place” 200-1). If a majority of students and people encounter disability through narratives like those I have visited here and explore throughout my dissertation, then a central goal, certainly of this work, is to dimensionalize and “flesh out” those representations to the materiality and lived experience of disability in sociotextual ways to advocate for more equitable consideration and opportunities for disabled people and those texts that draw from and celebrate them. Akin to the “controversy” of Quinn’s sculpture of Lapper in Venice, why must disability be out of place? In order to maintain the idea and practice of the humanities attracting the widest audience possible, as mentioned, disability as a requisite component of literary theory classes would encourage more inclusivity and diversity.

I think of Wendell’s observation of the “pace of life” (37) as a sociocultural construction and consider to whom such a ‘common’ phrase applies and how that thread/threat of bodily normativity continually seeks to align its anomalies into agreement. Amidst centuries of oppression (and a present of discretion) disability graduands walk down during graduation ceremonies, across Convocation Mall and out the Transportation Centre. Filming took about two months and appeared for about six seconds in the final film” (emphasis my own). Presumably, then, Terry Fox might take an elevator to convocation?
occupies spaces between its elimination, the improvement of its abilities and the salability of its representations. As the image from a Canadian petroleum company’s advertisement declares, “it” runs marathons now – and of course the “it” is the oil that makes the prostheses, rather than the impressive athletic spectacle up for consumption. As disability studies and theory continue to grow, Davis calls attention to that stigma-free able white, sporting male we met earlier (a model the star of the above image certainly fits). He writes: “Goffman may have been influential in the early days of disability studies, but now disability studies themselves are redefining stigma in ways uniquely suited to our own discussion” (xiii). As a differently defined community – and differently defined disability communities – manages to wrest away and redefine the terms of its oppression, the idea that disabled people are peripheral does not apply easily to some of the roles disability performs in culture – thanks in part to its theories and its allies – to reveal art, practice and experiences I have only begun to encounter.
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