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THE POSTMODERN TURN IN DISABILITY STUDIES

Rob Mawyer

Like the category “disabled” itself, disability studies as a field of inquiry is porous, encompassing a wide range of disciplinary concerns, theoretical frameworks, and political projects. While the condition of being “disabled”—broadly and in intentionally fraught language, of being “disfigured,” “ill,” “deviant,” “slow,” “dumb,” “re-tarded,” “simple,” among innumerable other tags and labels—and its ontological and metaphysical meanings have concerned thinkers and cultural workers as far back as ancient Greece,¹ and while “disability” has long been a concern in the fields of medicine and the social sciences, there has occurred in roughly the past twenty years a significant interrogation in the humanities of cultural constructions of disability. In his introduction to *The Disability Studies Reader*, Len-nard J. Davis, arguably the best-known disability scholar in America, refers to a “newer generation of writers and scholars,” many of them influenced by postmodern critical theories, working in disability stud-ies today (4). Indeed, Disability Studies in recent years has found a home in the humanities, generally, and in English departments, specifically.

The genesis and maturation of a humanities-based disability stud-ies in the United States corresponds, in fact, to the profound shift in dominance in so-called First World countries from industrial to postin-dustrial modes of labor and production. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri characterize this shift as one from industry to service:

Services cover a wide range of activities from health care, education, and finance to transportation, entertainment, and advertising. The jobs for the most part are highly mobile and involve flexible skills. More important, they are characterized in general by the central role played by knowledge, information, affect, and communication. In this sense many call the postindustrial economy an informational economy. (285)

¹ For a review of disability in antiquity, see Martha Edwards’s “Deaf and Dumb in Ancient Greece” in Davis, *The Disability Studies Reader*, 29-51.

In this postindustrial economy, and in the social and cultural conditions it informs, there would seem to be greater freedom and opportunity available for people with disabilities. The physically disabled, for instance, long deemed incapable of valuable industrial labor, would seem in many ways perfectly “able” to manipulate knowledge and information, particularly where computerized technology is involved.² Advances in visual and auditory technology make communicating possible for more and more people who are deaf, blind, and mute. Finally, innovations in the way work gets done in the service sector allow for greater employment opportunities for those diagnosed with severe learning, mental, and developmental disabilities. In such a shifting economic milieu, when dominant ideas of what constitutes work and who can adequately perform it are open for interrogation, it comes as no surprise that cultural images and meanings of disability have become an area of increased intellectual and political concern for academics.

Sadly, however, and not shockingly, the potential for greater equality for the disabled has not yet been realized, despite the continued efforts of academics and social activists. As the following article will show, the postmodern turn in Disability Studies, while important and necessary, operates within a limited conceptual and methodological framework. For while most contemporary theorists of disability rightly conceive of it as a social relationship rather than merely a biological condition, the poststructuralist resistance to positing “root causes” effectively cuts off disability from its material, lived reality. To this end, postmodern disability studies, while masquerading as radical and progressive, only reifies the unequal social relations structured into a global capitalist economic paradigm. Or, to borrow from Fredric Jameson, disability studies attempts to take the temperature of an age without the proper instruments (*Postmodernism* xi). Disability studies, then, has become a progressive gesture, but until it embraces a needed materialist critique of the structural oppression and exploitation in capitalism, Disability Studies will remain *only* a gesture and little more.

In *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* Rosemary Hennessy offers a sustained materialist critique of post-structural feminist theory. She describes the conservative turn in feminism to “post-marxist” methods like cultural materialism, which, she claims, theorize the “cultural-ideological” manifestations of sex, gender, and

² See Bryan’s *The Sociopolitical Aspects of Disability*.

sexuality without adequate consideration of the economic base that informs them. To Hennessy, cultural materialists “maintain that culture may be historical and political, but it is not shaped by capitalism’s division of labor in any determinate way” (80). This poststructuralist denigration of Marxist determinism, far from strengthening cultural materialism and its institutional and professional practice—culture studies—actually weakens its position. Hennessy writes,

It seems to me that no analysis of cultural forms that professes to critically intervene in the violence taking place in the wake of neoliberal social policies can evade the historical relationships between culture and capital. In promoting a view of culture severed from any ties to the fundamental structures of capitalism, cultural studies is helping to reproduce forms of consciousness that supplement neoliberalism’s conservative individualism. (83)

While culture studies might at the surface seem to oppose neoliberal logic, it nevertheless reiterates, in its tendency to “exile meaning-making and identity in the realm of culture, sheltered from any link to capital or class,” neoliberalism’s potent ideology (83). In other words, cultural materialist methods deal only in the realm of culture without penetrating to the ways in which social relations are structured and ways of knowing, along with goods and profit, are produced.

It is this critique of cultural materialism that Hennessy brings to bear on Judith Butler’s poststructuralist feminist theories. In both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, Butler analyzes the performativity of identity by incorporating it into a cultural materialist conceptual model. However, Hennessy notes how for Butler materiality is “simply a matter of norms” (56) and then argues that “understanding the materiality of social life as so exclusively normative ... limits social relations to the domains of culture and law” (57). This cultural view of materiality, then, by refusing to acknowledge the extent to which capitalist divisions of labor overdetermine human relations, only masquerades as a critique of social oppression and injustice. By ignoring the root causes of social relations, cultural materialists like Butler reify capitalist social structures.

As a corrective to this postmodernist tendency to abstract social theory out of the logic of capitalist determinism, Hennessy proposes a historical materialist frame. “Historical materialism,” she writes,

understands social life to be historically and materially produced through relations of labor through which people make what is needed to survive. But this process does not happen without the ways of making sense, normative practices (culture-ideology), and the laws (state organization) that are part of the material production of social life. (59)

In other words, Hennessy's historical materialist method accounts for normative and juridical analyses, but still makes possible valuable critiques of capitalist ways of knowing. In general, then, Hennessy's historical materialist frame is not afraid to seek answers to the "why" questions that postmodern theory—what Jameson has termed the cultural logic of late capitalism—effectively occludes.

It is this critique that I would now like to aim at disability studies, for there seems to be a disjunction between its political project and its dominant theoretical paradigm. First, though, a brief discussion of the field's trajectory might be useful. Some of the most significant contributions to the field of humanities-based disability studies investigate the ways in which "disability" refers not to a human being's capacity to perform certain tasks or adopt certain behaviors, but rather to an individual's location within a social system. This insight challenges the traditional discourses of disability produced in the medical and clinical fields, and indeed much work in the humanities-based disability studies labors to reclaim "disability" from its medical/clinical articulations. "Disability," in other words, signifies to many scholars in disability studies a social standing and a web of cultural meanings rather than actual physical or mental ability.

In *Claiming Disability* Simi Linton maps the course of disability studies in the humanities. She maintains that disability studies "is an interdisciplinary field based on a sociopolitical analysis of disability and informed both by the knowledge base and methodologies used in traditional liberal arts, and by conceptualizations and approaches developed in areas of the new scholarship" (2). She goes on to note that "[these] scholarly explorations and the initiatives undertaken by the disability rights movement have resulted in new paradigms used to understand disability as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon" (2). However, Linton curiously abandons this social-political frame in favor of a primarily cultural-based inquiry. The first goal of disability studies, she states, should be to continue the valuable task of destabilizing the easy binary of able/disabled. The second and third related goals suggest that theorists of disability begin to articulate how disability might inform *all* content areas of education and then displace disability studies from the epistemologies of medicine, law, and other applied sciences. Instead, Linton advocates grounding disability studies more firmly in the epistemologies of the humanities (120-125). Clearly, these first goals incorporate in various ways the political and social aspects of disability that Linton claims *must* be part of disability studies' larger project. However, her move to ground disability studies in humanities-oriented epistemologies anticipates her fourth goal for the field: a postmodern interrogation

and deconstruction of “the vast realm of meaning-making that occurs in metaphysic and symbolic uses of disability” (125). She writes that these meaning-making devices “need to be analyzed in an array of cultural products to understand their meaning and functions, and to subvert their power” (125). Humanities-based disability studies, and particularly the literary analysis of disability, in Linton’s estimation, must deal with the cultural and artistic uses of disability in order to demystify them of their oppressive power and totalizing logic.

One of the first and most important works to take up the project of analyzing the “metaphysic and symbolic uses of disability” is Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Thomson investigates, in her own words, “how representation attaches meaning to bodies” (5). Noting how recent scholarship has delineated perceptions of otherness with regard to gender, race, and sexuality, she attempts to repair the oversight of physical disability by studying the “physically extraordinary figure.” Throughout her book, she deconstructs the figures of the cripple, the invalid, and the freak in order to “interrogate the conventions of representation and unravel the complexities of identity production within social narratives of bodily difference” (5). The first part of *Extraordinary Bodies* theorizes the operation of disability in cultural and literary representations, while the second, more substantial part of the book focuses on American freak shows, social protest novels, and twentieth-century, women-centered, African American liberatory novels as sites that construct disability. While this second part is useful for its detailed readings of cultural products, it is the first part of Thomson’s book that must be examined here in more detail.

Early in her book, Thomson brings together the discourses of feminist studies and disability studies in order to determine how other forms of cultural otherness might enrich investigations of representations of disability. While the parallels between the two fields are not one-to-one, she concedes, women and the disabled are the negative terms opposing a culturally privileged ideal. Women are opposite the narrowly prescribed ideal of men; the disabled are the negative of an able-bodied ideal. Thomson deftly complicates this formulation, however, by noting that the “normative female body ... occupies a dual and paradoxical cultural role: it is the negative term opposing the male body, but it is the privileged term opposing the abnormalized female body” (28). Thomson expands this reading in “Feminist Theory, the Body, and the Disabled Figure,” an essay collected in Lennard Davis’s *Disability Studies Reader*. Here, Thomson furthers her taxonomy of disability and feminism:

Both feminism and the interrogation of disability I am undertaking challenge existing social relations; both resist interpretations of certain bodily configurations and functioning as deviant; both question the ways that particularity or difference is invested with meaning; both examine the enforcement of universalizing norms; both interrogate the politics of appearance; both explore the politics of naming; both participate in positive identity politics. (281)

Drawing upon her earlier complication of the two discourses in *Extraordinary Bodies*, she concludes that the disabled woman is “a cultural third term, a figure constituted by the originary binary pair of the masculine figure and the feminine figure” (288). She concludes by arguing that since “representation structures reality, the cultural figures that haunt the days of the living must ... be wrestled to the floor before even modest self-definition, let alone political action, can proceed” (288).

Later in the first section of her book, Thomson draws upon sociological and anthropological discourses to theorize disability further. First, she discusses “stigma theory,” an “interactive social process in which human traits are deemed not only different but deviant” (31). The process of stigmatization, which is an intrinsic part of collective acculturation, creates a “shared, socially maintained and determined conception of the normal individual” (31). Thus, stigmatization “legitimizes the status quo, naturalizes attributions of inherent inferiority and superiority, and obscures the socially constructed quality of both categories” (31).

While stigma theory offers no explanation of how attitudes about bodies change or, for that matter, how cultural norms change, Thomson quickly moves to Foucault’s familiar theorization of “docile bodies” that are disciplined and controlled by cultural discourses of power. Whereas stigma theory does not historicize bodily norms, Foucault locates the modern context of disability, Thomson maintains, in the shift to the rationalistic, Enlightenment concepts of the body, which ultimately produced “the rigid taxonomies so fundamental to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western science and medicine’s project of distributing human characteristics in discrete and hierarchical relations to one another” (39). Those individuals who participate, in other words, in the privileged segments of the hierarchy—those individuals who are not marked as deviating from the norm—do not have to bear the weight of “otherness.” Thus, Foucault’s historicization of shifting discourses of power helps Thomson effectively “post-structuralize” stigma theory in order to explain the formation of social hierarchies.

Of course, despite Thomson’s reading of Foucault and stigma

theory together and her provocative discussion of disability within a feminist frame, the question of how norms actually get established remains. In fact, left unsaid here, but what underwrites Thomson's logic, is the simple premise that, from a social systems perspective, disabled people merely look differently and act differently and therefore are stigmatized. Stigma theory would leave the matter at that, and Foucault's historicization of docile bodies does not change this weakness. Thomson, however, does not need to understand *why* the norms are in place to commence with her analysis of cultural representations disability. Her analyses, of course, are informed by a postmodern logic that would have us disregard the project of developing a supple vocabulary to explain how, in Jameson's words, "the interrelationship of culture and the economic ... is not a one way street but a continuous reciprocal interaction and feedback loop" (xv). Thomson gives us here—even in her analysis of freak shows—an interrogation of cultural forms entirely divorced from capitalist divisions of labor and social structures.

I agree that representations must be contended with within a broader, progressive political movement. However, I disagree with Thomson's too easy assertion that representation structures reality. Rather, I would suggest that the structures of reality are apprehended *through* representation. Thus, we must not stop at the level of representation but rather must interrogate the reasons for the representations. For while Thomson's theorization of disability in *Extraordinary Bodies* and in "Feminist Theory, the Body, and the Disabled Figure" is important for its exploration of heretofore uncharted territory, it is clearly limited in its scope. At no point does Thomson ask the "Why" questions. Why, for example, do these ideals exist? Why do negative representations proliferate? Thomson analysis lacks a firm grounding in the material, lived reality of disabled people. By focusing solely on cultural representation of disability, Thomson ignores the larger and more pressing issue of the extent to which "able" bodies are profitable ones in a capitalist economy and how certain "disabled" bodies are either tossed away as burdensome or, in the case of freak shows, are reincorporated when deemed profitable. The wage labor that disabled individuals sell as commodity, in this case, is their own "grotesque" appearance.

Indeed, Thomson's lack here ultimately goes far beyond a simple conceptual limitation but rather belies an entire ideology. As Hennesy so persuasively demonstrates, cultural-ideological frameworks, of which Thomson's is certainly one, are actually conservative in that they abstract a "reality" out of the actual social relations at stake in global capitalism. The inability, or refusal, to ask "Why" questions—in

short, the sole focus on representations of disability—guarantees that the unequal social relationships and exploitation necessitated by capitalism will not be fully engaged. Cultural studies such as Thomson’s, while at least initially useful, are truly a capitalist way of knowing that ultimately cannot enact a progressive politics. Thus, the grand aims of Thomson’s project—to unravel the complexities of bodily difference—and of Linton’s vision for disability studies—to demystify and disempower the symbolic uses of disability—are never fully realized precisely because they never attempt to go beyond the logic of capitalism.

Linton’s goal for disability studies and Thomson’s theoretical and conceptual framework for analyzing “metaphysic and symbolic uses of disability” has influenced the “newer generation of writers and scholars” that Davis refers to in his introduction to *The Disability Studies Reader*. Philip K. Wilson, for example, in his recent essay on “monsters” and “freaks” connects eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical and popular discourses on disability in Great Britain and the US. He traces the shifting perceptions of and attitudes toward children who had supposedly been marked *in utero* by their mother’s imagination. He writes,

In both the medical and popular writings of Enlightenment Britain, visible skin markings on children were rarely perceived as more than superficial blemishes often caused, during fetal development, by maternal imagination. True, they were read as signs of stigmatizing and ostracizing deformities, leading children to be classified among *homo monstrosus*. Yet, however indelible, the markings adhered to the surface layer. In the following century, the markings begin figuratively to metastasize inwardly, where they became markings of an inborn immortality. (10-11)

Eighteenth-century “monsters,” then, stigmatized by their outward physical appearance, became the immoral, sullied “freaks” of the nineteenth-century. Inexplicably, what is missing from Wilson’s argument is an analysis that would yield insight into possible causes, aside from differences in physical appearance, for the unprecedented correlation in the nineteenth-century between physical deformity and morality. While he almost connects nineteenth-century constructions of disability and immorality to the Industrial Revolution’s need to produce and reproduce exemplary, profitable workers, he oddly fails, like Thomson does, to note how “freaks” are suddenly less marginalized but exploited more when they become profitable, like at freak shows and carnivals.

In “Modernist Freaks and Postmodernist Geeks” David Mitchell examines the literary grotesque as “an artistic fantasy that invokes

physical aberrancy as a visible symptom of social disorganization and collapse,” and which also “turns disability into a shorthand method of characterization that simplistically reveals the intangible secrets of a psyche in conflict” (348). Noting that traditional readings of the literary grotesque reinscribe biology rather than social institutions as the cause of physical aberrancy, Mitchell hopes to establish “a definitively postmodern subjectivity to an expanding repertoire of disability studies models for representing physical difference as a cultural process rather than a static biological condition” (349). He compares the modernist use of the grotesque in Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* to a postmodernist deployment in Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love*. The modernist freaks of Anderson’s novel, who characterize a “largely defoliated, alien, and imperfect world” are surpassed by the artist’s imagination, which seeks to “shore up and reverse the monstrosities of nature” (351). The artist, then, works in opposition to the natural world, which is characterized as ugly, deformed, disabled. In contrast, the geeks of Dunn’s novel embrace monstrosity and perform artistic perversity in order to “provide a space within which to interrogate the mythic packaging of desires” (362). In other words, postmodern subjectivity, in Mitchell’s view, denies the possibility of a somehow pure, unsullied social actor juxtaposed against a corrupted world. Rather, the literary grotesque comes to signify the postmodernist artist’s complicity with a “disabled” reality. As such, a postmodern subjectivity opens up a space for the interrogation of physical deformity as a cultural process rather than a biological “freak” occurrence.

Mitchell’s evocation of the packaging of desires seems vaguely to suggest a Marxist methodology, when in fact precisely what is missing from his analysis is an engagement with the material production of social relations. To Mitchell, “modern” and “postmodern” are primarily aesthetic categories with little connection to the organization of labor informing these categories. Mitchell’s analysis lacks the more supple ways of reading modern and postmodern aesthetics offered by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, for example, and by Jameson in a variety of places, among other notable writers.

The employment of Disability Studies in analyzing literary and cultural texts is currently mired in a theoretical and conceptual dead-end. The insistence on focusing on “representations” of disability in order, as Thomson and Linton suggest in different ways, to disarm them belies a political project that understandably and amiably hopes to elevate the status of disabled people in America. I see at least two limitations here. First, disability studies hopes to repair the

status of disabled people *within* the framework of a global capitalist system. The politics suggested in Thomson's work are at every point underwritten by notions of identity that are distinctly capitalist ways of knowing. Further, she underestimates the trenchant capacity for exploitation and oppression that capitalism fosters and needs. In fact, disability studies currently aims for the disabled to be slightly less exploited or, at worst, to join the ranks of exploiter, all of which seems incommensurate with a truly radical politics.

Second, Disability Studies currently suffers from the logics of localization and particularization, which are also capitalist ways of knowing. In *Empire* Hardt and Negri write,

In the decades of the current crisis of the communist, socialist, and liberal Left that has followed the 1960s, a large portion of critical thought, both in the dominant countries of capitalist development and in the subordinated ones, has sought to recompose sites of resistance that are founded on the identities of social subjects or national and regional groups, often grounding political analysis on the *localization of struggles*. (44)

This localist position, Hardt and Negri maintain, must be critiqued, as must the “the social machines that create and recreate the identities and differences that are understood to be local” (45). Currently, the political project of disability studies suffers from the localization of struggles, which effectively prevents the plights of the disabled in overdeveloped areas of the world, say, from ever being theorized next to those of the disabled in disadvantaged areas. This is not to say, however, that disability studies does not enjoy a productive cross-continental communication, for while clearly disability theorists in the US and abroad influence each other intellectually, as yet no political project has been posited linking the concerns of the disabled worldwide.³ This lack is coterminous with currently insufficient accounts in disability studies of the complex sets of social relations determined by capitalist modes of production.

At the heart of the matter, though, is a general abstraction of “disability” from its materiality—from its rootedness in daily life—and it is here that we must begin to make amends. Little is made, for example, of the “near total [economic] dependency” of the disabled and how

³ Two collections in particular—*Disability/Postmodernity*, ed. by Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare, and *Mind and Body Spaces*, ed. by Ruth Butler and Hester Parr—help capture the intellectual energy of continental disability studies. Alongside Davis's *The Disability Studies Reader*, these texts demonstrate both a transoceanic academic conversation among disability scholars and, demonstrably, an indebtedness to postmodern cultural materialist paradigms.

that corresponds to the transformation in modes of production from agrarian to industrial, creating a workforce of interested individuals competing to sell their wage labor (Nibert 70). Or, for example, on how the concentration and centralization of wealth under capitalism underwrites the ideologies of the free individual while making increasingly difficult the possibility of self-reliance, social mobility, or true, lived equality (Nibert 75-76).

To this end, I find promise in the works of Lennard J. Davis. In “Constructing Normalcy,” Davis too focuses on norms and analyzes the historical “invention” of “normalcy” in the nineteenth century.⁴ He locates the advent of body norms in industrialization and the concomitant set of practices and discourses linked to late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century notions of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and criminality. Whereas before industrialization in the Western world, Davis asserts, images of the *ideal body* are bound to divinity and artistic traditions working to visualize the gods’ bodies, processes of modernization establish a link between the body and industry and eventually result in the formulation of a “common man” (11). The pre-modern ideal body is the divine body and thus “not attainable by a human” (10); the assertion of an “average” or “normal” body, rationalized, Davis suggests, by the field of statistics and then disciplined and enforced by medico-scientific fields like eugenics, “implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm” (13). The establishment of a “norm,” then, divides bodies into standard and nonstandard categories.

This new knowledge in the nineteenth century that bodies can be normed and standardized, according to Davis, carries with it harsh consequences. Davis emphasizes the consequences of one particular field legitimated by modernity—fingerprinting. Modern systems of fingerprinting for personal identification are founded on the notion that physical traits could be inherited, and fingerprints themselves were often thought to be physical marks of parentage. The fingerprint, then, suggests a body’s identity, which, Davis concludes, “coincides with its [the body’s] essence and cannot be altered by moral, artistic, or human will” (15). He writes,

By this logic, the person enters into an identical relationship with the body, the body forms the identity, and the identity is unchangeable and indelible as one’s place on the normal curve. For our purposes, then, this fingerprinting of the body means that the marks of physical difference become synonymous with the identity of the person. (15)

⁴ “Constructing Normalcy” is excerpted from Davis’s longer work, *Enforcing Normalcy*, which at the time of printing I had not yet obtained. I acknowledge that a review of the full text is in order.

With this new discourse on the body in place, deviance from the norm soon can be identified with weakness, uselessness, and criminality. Thus suddenly and quite easily in the nineteenth century, “criminals, the poor, and people with disabilities might be mentioned in the same breath” (17).

Davis picks up this idea again in his more recent book, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*. This time, however, he ties the construction of normalcy more explicitly to social relations overdetermined by capitalist divisions of labor. Once again he draws upon “knowledge” rationalized by the field of statistics, which, he claims, following the logic of capitalism severed notions of equality among citizens from ethical considerations and placed them more fully within quasi-scientific considerations. Using Habermas’s delineation of the fundamental paradox in Enlightenment thinking between the philosophical/ethical goal of establishing societies of equality, freedom, and liberty and capitalism’s drive to distribute wealth unequally, Davis traces how advances in math and science were used to rationalize this paradox. Statistics, which could posit the bell curve as a natural law, “proved” that the distribution of wealth must also fall along this same curve. Thus, “the very theory that allows the individual to be instantiated in the collective on an equal basis also allows for wealth to be unequally distributed” (111). Davis writes further that

Once the ethical notion [of equality] is reconditioned by the statistical one, the notion of equality is transformed. Indeed, the operative notion of equality, especially as it applies to the working classes, is really one of interchangeability. As the average man can be constructed, so can the average worker. All working bodies are equal to all other working bodies because they are interchangeable. This interchangeability, particularly in nineteenth-century factories, means that workers’ bodies are conceptualized as identical. So the term “able-bodied” workers came to be interchangeable with able-bodied citizens. This ideological module has obvious references to the issue of disability. (111)

Thus, in *Bending Over Backwards* Davis begins the much needed project in humanities-based disability studies of delineating how capitalism overdetermines social relations, bodily norms, and human ways of knowing. His work, like Hennessy’s in feminist studies, begins to theorize materiality as not just discursive and normative. While his theories are certainly open to critique—he consistently narrows his focus to deafness, which might suggest another instance of the localization of struggles—Davis steadfastly refuses to allow mere *representations* of disability to be the object of study.⁵ This aspect of

⁵ Another significant flaw in Davis’s work is the subtle indication that disability

Davis's theories initiates, I believe, a truly progressive project.

While Davis is among the best-known disability studies scholars, his conceptual framework is certainly not representative of the field as a whole. Indeed, Davis even repeatedly praises the work done by scholars like Thomson. Ultimately, I attribute this to the postmodern turn in theory, generally, and in disability studies, particularly, which would make causality problematic and unfashionable. Do I support a return to some of the nastier consequences of modernism's totalizing logic? Of course not. What I propose, however, is a full and sustained critique of the limits of postmodern projects. Specifically, I want us to acknowledge, as Hardt and Negri and Hennessy suggest in various ways, how the localizing tendencies of postmodern thought effectively occlude the possibility of radical structural change. As Jameson writes, the

unforeseeable return of narrative as the narrative of the end of narratives, this return of history in the midst of the prognosis of the demise of historical telos, suggests ... the way in which virtually any observation about the present can be mobilized in the very search for the present itself and pressed into service as a symptom and an index of the deeper logic of the postmodern, which imperceptibly turns into its own theory and theory of itself. How could it be otherwise when there no longer exists any such "deeper logic" for the surface to manifest and when the symptom has become its own disease (and vice versa, no doubt)? (*Postmodernism* xii)

The time has come for disability studies to cease mobilizing its historicization in a search for the present—which ultimately is what cultural materialist projects undertake—and begin indexing what in *A Singular Modernity* Jameson refers to as an "ontology of the present." The time has come for disability studies to enact a truly radical project first by critiquing capitalist ways of knowing and then by recovering a Utopian narrative outside of the current structures of oppression and

studies is most effective when "owned by the disability community as opposed to [being] written about by 'normals'" ("Introduction" 1). This kind of statement—couched in the capitalist rhetoric of property and abiding a logic of exclusion—seems both politically and theoretically short-sighted.

This does, however, raise the pressing question of my own credibility here. How am I, a socially and culturally privileged "able" white male, authorized to critique the trajectory of disability studies? To answer this question, I refer to the porous category "disabled" itself. In a way, disability is a narrative of being human: all human beings are touched immediately, if not by disability itself, then by its *potential*. For old age, illness, and injury are themselves inevitable or unpredictable disabling consequences of being human. To this end, then, disability studies is not, *must not*, be the private property of "the disabled community."

exploitation. Capitalism makes all people “bend over backwards”; a truly radical disability studies can help us acknowledge that.

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