

# Feminist Theory, the Body, and the Disabled Figure

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“[T]he concept of a disability unites a highly marked, heterogeneous collection of embodiments whose only commonality is being considered abnormal. As a departure from a norm made neutral by an environment created to accommodate it, disability becomes intense, extravagant, and problematic embodiment. It is the unorthodox made flesh” (p. 156)

## I. The Female Body and the Disabled Body

- Aristotle’s choreography of bodies
  - Considered “congenitally disabled” individuals and females as deviations from the definitive norm
  - Affirms the connection of disabled and female bodies in \*considering a female is as it were a deformed/mutilated male
  - Definition of female as mutilated male
    - \*“otherness”: normative, “generic type” against which all corporeal variation is measured and found to be different, derivative, inferior, and insufficient
    - \*arranges somatic diversity into a hierarchy of value that assigns plentitude to some bodies and lack to others based on their configurations.
    - \*by defining femaleness as deviant rather than the essential maleness, he initiates the practice of marking what is deemed aberrant by asserting normativeness (male, white, or able-bodied superiority is naturalized, remaining undisputed and obscured by the ostensible problem of female, black, or disabled deviance)
- Disability and femaleness in Western discourse
  - Social identity and the body
    - 1) The social category of disability turns upon the significance accorded bodily functioning and configuration, just as the social category women does
    - 2) Placing disability studies in a feminist context allows feminist theory’s inquiries into gender as a category, the body’s role in identity and selfhood, and the complexity of social power relations to be brought to bear on an analysis of disability
    - 3) Applying feminist theory to disability analyses infuses it with feminism’s politicized insistence on the relationship between the meanings attributed to bodies by cultural representations and the consequences of those meanings in the world

## II. Feminist Theory and Disability Discourse

- Feminism’s dual aims of politicizing the materiality of bodies while rewriting the category of woman are exactly the kinds of interrogations that should be brought to bear upon disability
  - Broad sociopolitical critique of systemic, inequitable power relations based on binary social categories grounded in the body
  - Theoretical perspective and methodology that examines gender as a discursive, ideological, and material category that interacts with but does not subordinate either other social identities or the particularities of embodiment, history, and location that inform subjectivity
- Feminism and the interrogation of disability: theorizing disability in the ways that feminism has theorized gender
  - “minoritizing” and “universalizing”
    - \*a minoritizing view minimizes difference by imagining its significance and concerns as limited to a narrow, specific, relatively fixed population
    - \*a universalizing view sees issues surrounding a particularized form of difference as having continuing importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of identities

- A universalizing disability discourse: +(1) advocates political equality by denaturalizing disability's assumed inferiority +(2) destigmatizes gender, racial differences, and the corporeal traits we call disability -(3) threatens to obscure the material and historical effects of those differences and to destabilize the social categories we claim as significant in our own and other's lives
  - Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990: a broad civil rights bill that is only beginning to be implemented; it legally mandated access to public spaces and institutions
  - A constructionist argument is to denaturalize the assumption that disability is bodily insufficiency and to assert that disability arises from the interaction of embodied differences with an unaccommodating physical and social environment
    - \* Strategic constructionism: destigmatizes the disabled body, located difference relationally, denaturalizes normalcy, and challenges appearance hierarchies
    - \* Strategic essentialism: validates experience and consciousness, imagines community, authorizes history, and facilitates self-naming

### III. Imagining Feminist Disability Discourse

- Disability signals the body that cannot be universalized
  - Unified only by 'exclusion'
  - Disability confounds any notion of a generalizable, constant corporeal subject by flaunting the vagaries of an embodiment shaped by history, defined by particularity, and at odds with its environment
  - Standpoint Theory: recognizes the local and complex quality of embodiment
    - \*emphasizes the multiplicity of all women's identities, history, and embodiment
    - \*recognizes that individual material situations structure the subjectivity from which particular women can speak and perceive with authority
    - \*reformulated a monologic notion of gender identity into a more complex conception of identity as a dynamic matrix of interrelated, often contradictory, experiences, strategies, styles, and attributions mediated by culture and one's specific history, forming a network that cannot be separated meaningfully into discrete entities or ordered into a hierarchy
    - \*acknowledging identity's particular and complex nature allows inflections (such as disabilities) or attributions (such as fat, disfigured, abnormal, ugly, or deformed) to be inserted into our considerations of identity and subjectivity
- The confrontation with bodily difference that disability provokes also places some disabled women at odds with several mainstream feminist assumptions that do not take into account disabled women's material situations.
  - Disabled women must prove their sexuality
  - Disabled women must defend against the assessment that their bodies are unfit for motherhood or that they are the infantilized objects
  - Feminist abortion rationale: seldom questions the prejudicial assumption that "defective" fetuses destined to become disabled people should be eliminated
  - The ideology of autonomy and independence emanating from liberal feminism and the broader impulse toward female empowerment
  - Feminist practice often leaves no space for the needs and accommodations that disabled women's bodies require

### IV. Femininity and Disability

- Historical practices of femininity

- Chinese foot-binding
- African scarification
- Clitoridectomy
- Euroamerican corseting
- “Standard” feminine conditions (blur the line between normal feminine behavior and pathology)
  - Anorexia
  - Hysteria
  - Agoraphobia
  - Beauty’s disciplinary regime
- Feminizing vs. Abnormalizing
  - Feminizing practices normalize the female body, while disabilities abnormalize it
  - Feminization prompts the gaze while disability prompts the stare
  - Feminization alterations increase a woman’s cultural capital, while disabilities reduce it
- Normalized and abnormalized female bodies
  - It is the cultural figure of the disabled woman, rather than the actual woman with a disability, that this essay focuses on

The figure of the disabled woman is best apprehended as a product of a conceptual triangulation – she is a cultural third term, a figure constituted by the binary pair of the masculine figure and the feminine figure. Thus, the disabled female figure occupies an intragender position; that is, she is not only defined against the masculine figure, but she is imagined as the antithesis of the normative woman as well.

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#### Discussion Questions:

(1) What are your views on feminism, disability, and reproductive rights?

(2) Where do you fall on the “Normalizing.....Abnormalizing” continuum with regards to eating disorders (specifically anorexia) and cosmetic surgery? What beliefs do you have that support your stance? In what ways are these beliefs shaped by sociocultural expectations or standards?

(3) What are specific benefits of applying a feminist theoretical perspective to women’s disability discourse?

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#### Useful references:

- (1) Brumberg, J. (1997). *The body project: An intimate history of American girls*. New York: Vintage Books.
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- (3) Weitz, R. (2003). *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- (4) Lightfoot-Klein, H. (1989). *Prisoners of ritual: An odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- (5) Wolf, N. (1991). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. New York: Morrow.