

# The Disability Studies Reader

Second Edition

Edited by Lennard J. Davis

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# Introduction

This reader is one of the first devoted to disability studies. But it will not be the last. Disability studies is a field of study whose time has come. For centuries, people with disabilities have been an oppressed and repressed group. People with disabilities have been isolated, incarcerated, observed, written about, operated on, instructed, implanted, regulated, treated, institutionalized, and controlled to a degree probably unequal to that experienced by any other minority group. As 15 percent of the population, people with disabilities make up the largest physical minority within the United States. One would never know this to be the case by looking at the literature on minorities and discrimination.

Now the impetus to recognize the level of oppression, both overt and by marginalization, is being organized by people with disabilities and other interested parties. The exciting thing about disability studies is that it is both an academic field of inquiry and an area of political activity. The act of assembling a body of knowledge owned by the disability community as opposed to one written about that community by “normals” is part of an ongoing process that includes political actions involving the classroom, the workplace, the courts, the legislature, the media, and so on.

So, this volume appears at the moment that disability, always an actively repressed *memento mori* for the fate of the normal body, gains a new, nonmedicalized, and positive legitimacy both as an academic discipline and as an area of political struggle. As with any new discourse, disability studies must claim space in a contested area, trace its continuities and discontinuities, argue for its existence, and justify its assertions.

To do this, the case must be made clear that studies about disability have not had historically the visibility of studies about race, class, or gender for complex as well as simple reasons. The simple reason is the general pervasiveness of discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities leading to their marginalization as well as the marginalization of the study of disability. Progressives in and out of academia may pride themselves on being sensitive to race or gender, but they have been “ableist” in dealing with the issue of disability. While race, for example, has become in the past twenty years a more than acceptable modality from which to theorize in the classroom and in print, a discourse, a critique, and a political struggle, disability has continued to be relegated to hospital hallways, physical therapy tables, and remedial classrooms. The civil rights movement, a long history of discussion of the issues around slavery, the attention demanded by the “problem” of inner cities, and governmental discrimination have created a consciousness among progressives that legitimizes ethnicity as a topic for cultural study. It is possible to have a Henry Louis Gates or a bell hooks in a literature faculty, but it has been virtually impossible to have a person teaching about disability within the humanities. No announcements of jobs in the area of disability studies yet appear in the professional journals of English, history, or philosophy. In other words, disability has been seen as eccentric, therapeutically oriented, out-of-the-mainstream, and certainly not representative of the human condition—not as race, class, or gender seem representative of that condition.

But, how strange this assumption. What is more representative of the human condition than the body and its vicissitudes? If the population of people with disabilities is between thirty-five and forty-three million, then this group is the largest physical minority in the United States. Put another way, there are more people with disabilities than there are African Americans or Latinos.<sup>1</sup> But why have **the disabled been rendered more** invisible than other groups? Why are not issues about perception, mobility, accessibility, distribution of bio-resources, physical space, difference not seen as central to the human condition? Is there not something to be gained by all people from exploring the ways that

the body in its variations is metaphorized, disbursed, promulgated, commodified, cathected, and de-cathected, normalized, abnormalized, formed, and deformed? In other words, is it not time for disability studies to emerge as an aspect of cultural studies, studies in discrimination and oppression, postmodern analyses of the body and bio-power?

The first assumption that has to be countered in arguing for disability studies is that the “normal” or “able” person is already fully up to speed on the subject. My experience is that while most “normals” think they understand the issue of disability, they in fact do not. When it comes to disability, “normal”<sup>2</sup> people are quite willing to volunteer solutions, present anecdotes, recall from a vast array of films instances they take for fact. No one would dare to make such a leap into Heideggerian philosophy for example or the art of the Renaissance. But disability seems so obvious—a missing limb, blindness, deafness. What could be simpler to understand? One simply has to imagine the loss of the limb, the absent sense, and one is half-way there. Just the addition of a liberal dose of sympathy and pity along with a generous acceptance of ramps and voice-synthesized computers allows the average person to speak with knowledge on the subject.

But disability studies, like any other discourse, requires a base of knowledge and a familiarity with discursive terms and methodologies, as well as, most often, some personal involvement. The apparent ease of intuitive knowledge is really another aspect of discrimination against people with disabilities. How could there be anything complex, intellectually interesting, or politically relevant about a missing limb or a chronic impairment? Pity or empathy do not lend themselves to philosophy, philology, or theoretical considerations in general.

But, far from pity or empathy, people working in the field of disability are articulating and theorizing a political, social, and ideological critique. The work contained in this reader, only a sampling of the many articles and books published on the subject, is representative of this growing specialization as it spans the human sciences—literary studies, art history, anthropology, sociology, post-colonial studies, theory, feminist studies, and so on. But be aware: This book is not a collection of articles about how people *feel* about disability; nor is it designed to “sensitize” normal readers to the issue of disability; nor is it a collection of pieces focusing on the theme of disability in literature, film, or television. Rather, this is a reader that places disability in a political, social, and cultural context, that theorizes and historicizes deafness or blindness or disability in similarly complex ways to the way race, class, and gender have been theorized.

It is not as if disability studies has simply appeared out of someone’s head at this historical moment. It would be more appropriate to say that disability studies has been in the making for many years, but, like people with disabilities, has only recently recognized itself as a political, discursive entity. Indeed, like the appearance of African-American studies following rapidly on the heels of the civil rights movement, there is a reciprocal connection between political praxis by people with disabilities and the formation of a discursive category of disability studies. That is, there have been people with disabilities throughout history, but it has only been in the last twenty years that one-armed people, quadriplegics, the blind, people with chronic diseases, and so on, have seen themselves as a single, allied, united physical minority.<sup>3</sup> Linked to this political movement, which is detailed in Joseph Shapiro’s *No Pity*, David Hevey’s *Creatures Time Forgot*, and Oliver Sacks’ *Seeing Voices*, among other works, has been the political victory of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, which guarantees the civil rights of people with disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

Disability studies, as did cultural studies, unites a variety of ongoing work. That this work was largely hidden from view is a telling fact. If one looks up “disability” or “disability studies” in a database or library catalogue, one will find slim pickings, particularly if the areas of medical treatment, hospital or institutional management, and out-patient treatment are eliminated. The reason for this dearth of reference is complex. First, there is the historical absence of a discursive category. When I tried to locate a copy of my recent book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* in a university bookstore, I was told to look under “self help.” Currently, there is no area in a bookstore where works on disability studies can be placed. This absence of a discursive category was more tellingly revealed

at a meeting of the Committee on Academics with Disabilities at the Modern Language Association headquarters. A bibliographer of the *MLA Bibliography* informed the committee that there was almost no way of retrieving articles or books on the cultural history of disability since proper categories did not exist. For example, an article on “crippled saints” could not be searched by computer because the word “crippled” was disallowed by MLA regulations as constituting discriminatory language. The bibliographer therefore filed the article under “saints” thus rendering it unretrievable by anyone with an interest in disability.<sup>5</sup> Further, until now, American Sign Language was listed in the database as an “invented language” along with the language of the Klingons of *Star Trek*. Thanks to the efforts of activists, this categorization will no longer be the case and American sign language will be listed as a legitimate language. This absence of a discursive category is as much a function of discrimination and marginalization as anything else. If one had tried to find the category “composers, female” in music history thirty years ago, there would have been no such category. The category of “African-American literature” would not have existed. In the late 1990s disability studies has been “disappeared.” As of 1997, the MLA is redressing this absence in its database.

The absence of categories is only one reason that disability studies has been suppressed. The second reason is the erasure of disability as a category when other “stronger” categories are present. So, unless a writer, artist, or filmmaker is known for his or her disability, as was Beethoven or Helen Keller, he is not thought of as a person with disabilities. Therefore, the work is not included in any canon of cultural production. How outrageous this is can be understood if we made the analogy with the suppression of the gender, color, race, ethnicity, or nationality of a writer. How many people realize that included in the category of people with disabilities are: John Milton, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Alexander Pope, Harriet Martineau, John Keats, George Gordon Byron, Toulouse-Lautrec, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, James Thurber, Dorothea Lange, José Luis Borges, John Ford, Raoul Walsh, André de Toth, Nicholas Ray, Tay Garnett, William Wyler, Chuck Close, and many others? Moreover, the work of many talented writers, artists, photographers and so on who were disabled have had their work minimalized or suppressed in the same way that people of color or women have experienced. The recovery of this work is only now beginning.<sup>6</sup>

The work of many scholars who have investigated aspects of the body is now being reassembled into the field of disability studies. So for example, Sander Gilman’s work on disease, David Rothman on asylums, Erving Goffman on stigma, Leslie Fieldler on freaks, Susan Sontag on the metaphors of illness, Mikhail Bakhtin on the grotesque, followed by postmodern work like Michel Foucault on disease, mental illness, and sexuality, Jacques Derrida on blindness, Kaja Silverman on deformity in film, Judith Butler and Susan Bordo on anorexia—all of these works might not have been seen as existing under the rubric of disability studies, but as the field evolves, it recuperates and includes this earlier work as a retrospectively organized set of originating documents much in the way that structuralism turned back to the work of Saussure or that Marx relied on Hegel.

While this historical reserve of writings on disease, the body, freakishness and so on exists, the work of a newer generation of writers and scholars looks toward feminist, Marxist, postmodern, and cultural studies models for understanding the relation between the body and power. This next generation of writing tends to be created from within the boundaries of disability. While many earlier writers had an anthropological approach, with the weakness and imperial quality of anthropological work, others wrote from the perspective of “having” a disability. That type of work tended to be written so that “normal” people might know what it is like to be blind, crippled, deaf, and so on. The danger of that kind of project is that it is embarked on with the aim of evoking “sympathy” or “understanding.” The dialectical relation of power involved in such a transaction ultimately ends up having the writing be *for* the “normal.” The inappropriateness of such “sensitizing” work can be seen in works written, for example, to whites explaining what it is like to be black or to men explaining what it is like to be female. Disability studies, for the most part, shuns this unequal power transaction in favor of advocacy, investigation, inquiry, archeology, genealogy, dialectic, and deconstruction. The model of a sovereign subject revealing or reveling in that subjectivity is put into question.

In this anthology, scholars discuss the construction of disability in ancient Greece, in the English Renaissance and Enlightenment, in nineteenth-century France, as well as the creation of the concept of “normalcy” in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America. This work is reflective of the new historical revisionism allowed by the introduction of the concept of disability into practices of Marxist, feminist, queer, ethnic, postcolonial, and postmodern criticism. Previous work on the body can now be amplified and expanded. In addition, works that theorize disability and Deafness look at the notion of difference as an opportunity to defamiliarize received truths about culture and the body. I have also reprinted some fiction and poetry. This literary work is not here to “sensitize” readers but to explore the richness of experience and creativity offered by the opportunity of disability. The writers are aggressive about their insight, not defensive. They have a constitutive experience of disability and use that knowledge within their aesthetic ability. But these works should not be ghettoized as “disability literature” any more than T. S. Eliot should be used as an example of able-bodied writing.

In assembling this reader, I have selected only some material and some representative impairments, but much more work is being done and needs to be done in this major project of reconceiving history through the lens of disability studies. Many will find their impairments missing. I can only plead limited resources, limited space, and probably limited imagination.

A fair number of articles deal with deafness. The reason for this focus is twofold: (1) personal interest, and (2) the rather large body of historical materials on the history of deafness. My apologies to whomever does not find this field of inquiry interesting. This reader is only a beginning, the thin edge of a wedge which will change the normative way we conceive of the world, of literature, of cultural production, of voice, of sight, of language. In its broadest application, disability studies aims to challenge the received in its most simple form—the body—and in its most complex form—the construction of the body. Since we can no longer essentialize the body, we can no longer essentialize its differences, its eccentricities, its transgressions. Perhaps disability studies will lead to some grand unified theory of the body, pulling together the differences implied in gender, nationality, ethnicity, race, and sexual preferences. Then, rather than the marginalized being in the wheelchair or using sign language, the person with disabilities will become the ultimate example, the universal image, the modality through whose knowing the postmodern subject can theorize and act.

## Notes

1. African Americans make up 11.8 percent of the U. S. population. Latinos comprise 9.5 percent, and Asians are 3.1 percent of the general population (U. S. Census Bureau statistics cited in the *New York Times* (March 25, 1996; A15).
2. I will refrain from putting “normal” in quotation marks henceforth, but I do so as long as readers will recall that I am always using this term with the complex set of ironies and historic specificities the term carries. I will assume, perhaps problematically, an agreement on the fact that not one of us is, or can be, normal, nor can anyone describe what a normal person is.
3. I have deliberately left the Deaf off of this list. (I use the capitalized term to indicate the culturally Deaf, as opposed to the simple fact of physical deafness.) The reason is that many Deaf do not consider themselves people with disabilities but rather members of a linguistic minority. The Deaf argue that their difference is actually a communication difference—they speak sign language—and that their problems do not exist in a Deaf, signing community, whereas a group of legless people will not transcend their motor impairments when they become part of a legless community. The argument is a serious one and, although I personally feel that the Deaf have much to gain by joining forces with people with disabilities, I honor the Deaf argument in this reader. See Harlan Lane’s article “Construction of Deafness” (in this volume).
4. This victory is in some sense a pyrrhic one since the letter of law is easier to manifest than the spirit, and so the number of people with disabilities who are unemployed, for example, remains as high if not higher than before the Act was passed. (*New York Times* October 23, 1994 A: 22). In addition, the Act has no enforcement mechanism or agency, so it relies on individuals bringing lawsuits on their own—a method that for most people with disabilities is not a practical remedy. Most recently, the budget and tax cuts of 1994–96 have sliced dramatically into entitlements for special education, home-care, and many of the other programs that people with disabilities rely on to provide access and support.
5. The MLA is now beginning to redress this problem. Presumably, other databases and catalogues will follow suit.
6. Work that does this recovery includes Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Silent Poetry: Deafness, Sign, and Visual Culture in Modern France*, Martin Norder, *Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*, and various articles and books by John S. Schuchman.