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Hannah Widdifield
Coastal Carolina University

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Who's Allowed to Ride the Short Bus?: Un-Defining Disability

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BY

Hannah Widdifield

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Who's Allowed to Ride the Short Bus?: Un-Defining Disability

Think back to the day that you received your driver's license. Maybe you felt an unsettling sense of responsibility, but I would wager that most of you were thrilled. It took a bit of work—a written test that you had to study for and a road test you had to practice for and hours at your after-school job, trudging through in hopes of saving up enough to get a used clunker. Otherwise, it was a relatively painless experience. There were no identity crises or self-assessments or any of the strangeness you're about to hear.

I started working toward my license at the usual age, but a few years passed before I received it. I scored perfectly on my written test, so that wasn't the issue. The problem arose when I wanted to take driving lessons. You see, not many Drivers' Education establishments own vehicles that are modified for wheelchair users. What's more, the places that do have the equipment don't trust fledgling permit holders with their expensive automobiles. So I had to be trained for training. But first, I had to be approved to be trained for training. And that's when I was sent to the Columbia office of the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department for a bevy of tests that would prove to some ambiguous "them" that I was fit to operate a motor vehicle.

I arrived at the facility only to learn that I had to stay overnight for a few days, which wasn't in the original plan. Then I was introduced to the other individuals that were receiving various types of training. Among them was a double-amputee who was trying to get over a painkiller addiction and who needed to be retaught how to behave in a professional setting. There was also a man fresh out of a ten-year prison stint for shooting and killing his neighbor. There were various drug-addicts and stroke victims and some inmates as well. All of them were

at least twenty years my senior. Some of them casually groped me and were only mildly scolded by staff members, only to be forgiven because of their extenuating circumstances.

Surely, there had been a mistake. All I wanted to do was get my license. Everyone else was being taught how to get dressed in the morning and how to use Microsoft Office, but none was looking to drive; most weren't legally allowed. When I spoke to the director of the program and voiced my concerns, she frowned and thumbed through some papers and said, "You're in the wrong place."

Somewhere along the line, my file had been marked as "special needs" and was ultimately grouped together with the files of criminals and convicts and others who had very obvious "special needs." I was in the company of society's outcasts and rejects. Because there wasn't already a slot into which "they" could place me, I was generalized into a catchall category that I now shared with the outcasts and rejects. My daily needs were harder to take care of. It was harder to judge how to approach me. But it was easier to toss me in a miscellaneous bin. The act seemed inherently ignorant, yet it made me wonder if perhaps I was a sort of criminal—my crime, that of inconveniencing them.

However easy it may be to do, criminalizing—or less maliciously, categorizing—disability does not make it easier to accommodate. Clumping people with "special needs" together does not meet those needs any more efficiently and labeling those needs as "special" is vague and ineffective. The disabled aren't pegged into their roles for practical reasons, but because of inherited stigmas that are continuously encouraged by institutional policies, popular culture, and art. My thesis is in part an attempt to uncover and articulate a personal and social history of disability. In it I try to puzzle out how misconceptions regarding disability are formed, and I question how these can be transfigured. The movement to embrace Disability Studies (DS)

is already well underway. It can be (and has been) appropriated for academics to study and teach, but I worry that it lacks personal experience and opinion. In this sense, I'm concerned about the future of the field.

A brief point about the methodology that I follow in my thesis should be addressed: as my opening anecdote illustrates, this essay will not only call for more personal experience, but offer some as well. While I feel it is critical for myself and for those who are interested in the field to read and incorporate the theoretical interpretations of disability, I insist that disability studies (or any engagement with disability) be embedded in pragmatism, readability, and artistry. After all, disability—the signifier, and not the sign—is a human condition, whether it is constructed or not. If we expect society to actively approach disability, the literature that engages it or is invested in it and represents it as human experience must be relatable and above all else, teachable.

I. Theory and Definition

Disability Studies is a relatively new and rapidly expanding field within the larger academic categorization of identity studies. The field in its current state is struggling to legitimize itself as a study with staying power, but with strong connections to women, gender, and various minority studies, DS is an untapped source of insight into the broader question of identity. What makes DS unique, however, and so interesting to engage is that it focuses on issues of identity that can be thrust upon any person at any point in their life, unsolicited. In an attempt to showcase the marginalization of disabled individuals, the field looks at the definition of disability, the aesthetics of and the taboo surrounding it, and representations of disabled people in art. Literature on the subject abounds.

First and foremost, I want to establish the bases for my use of the terms “disabled people” or “disabled individual.” When I use the terms “disabled people” or “disabled individual,” it is not meant degradingly. I understand the concern that using “disabled” as an adjective in these phrases may suggest that said individual is defined by her quality of being disabled, but that is not my intent in any way. There are three reasons for my use of the terms, which in turn illustrate some of the points that I make in this essay. First of all, it’s simply more efficient than saying “persons with disabilities” or “a person with a disability.” The indirectness and clunkiness of terms such as “persons with disabilities” potentially indicate users’ discomfort with the idea or concept of disability. Thus they feel the need to distance themselves through language (and political correctness) from an experience that may be altogether alien or alienating for them to ponder. Secondly, the term “disability” is underdeveloped and suggests a finality that simply does not exist. By using it in various connotations, I hope to illustrate its versatility and ultimately, its arbitrariness. This is not meant to deemphasize the importance of language within the field—in fact, the next section of this paper will be devoted to its weight. But if this paper argues that “disabled” and “disability” are terms that have been thrust upon individuals by society and are therefore not inherent to their self-definition, its syntactical location, whether it is before or after the term “person/individual,” makes little difference to my overall argument. And finally, I will continue using the adjective-noun order in this paper because it is vital, in terms of movement and identity studies, to redirect the power of aggressive words by taking it back from those that label and offering it to those being labeled. *I call (or name) myself disabled and crippled: by doing so I make myself the subject and not the object of discussion.*

While definitions of any sort work within parameters that limit the scope of identity, it is still vital to address the definition of disability, or the lack thereof. Lennard Davis devotes most

of the preface of *Enforcing Normalcy* to unraveling the definition of disability and the history behind the “normal” versus “abnormal” dichotomy. Similarly, I will begin by explaining the history of the word “handicap,” which was originally used in the seventeenth century “to describe a kind of lottery” in which a hand went into a cap, a person’s name was picked out, and that person was given the authority to choose the values of two items exchanged by other people; thus, the term connoted a hierarchy of worth. (“handicap”) “Hand i’ cap” became associated with the concept of two items, one of more monetary value than the other, and thus more desirable than the other as well. The term was carried over to the discourse accompanying the sporting culture of horseracing during the eighteenth century wherein a horse that had a more valuable (generally physical) advantage was “handicapped” to even the field. But the term “handicapped” arrived long after “disability,” which originally referred to any *inability* to perform a task. Only once the two terms were inextricably linked did disability begin to connote wrongness. In effect, the history of the word suggests that a disabled person is a less valuable person and has been lessened, in some capacity, by a handicapping.

I offer this history, not in attempt to define, but to contextualize the origins and history of the terms that are commonly associated with disability. Part of the instability of disability studies as a field is its inability to provide solid parameters. What constitutes a disability? Who is qualified to decide that a person has a disability? Is a disability medically or socially defined? And what’s the difference between impairment and disability? These questions have been answered to some extent, but that does not mean they have been addressed accurately or thoroughly. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, “an individual with a disability is defined...as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a

person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (ADA, 1990). This definition hardly suffices for legal purposes and it certainly does not pin down any sort of practical boundaries for what establishes a disability. By noting perception as a defining factor, it at least acknowledges the role of society in forming understandings of disability. But the ADA aims to simplify a wide range of impairments into a concise definition when perhaps it would be more appropriate to define what constitutes an accommodation. On more than one occasion, I have been asked to prove my disability. Most recently, when requesting services from my university’s Office for Students with Disabilities, I met with the director to discuss various accommodations that may be offered to me. I arrived in my wheelchair, as is necessary for me to be mobile and was told that I needed to bring official documentation of my medical condition to prove that I have a disability. My medical condition and my disability, while associated, are not one and the same in my eyes and there was something degrading about the institutionalization of my disability and needs. Moreover, per the ADA, I am defined as “an individual with a disability” simply by being perceived as such. The language here is utterly illogical and counterintuitive. If a definition is required at all, “disability” ought to be the state in question, not the individual. According to the third clause in the act, one does not need to actually have an impairment, but only be perceived by others as having the impairment. This logic clearly condones the social construction of disability; while it may have been written with good and helpful intentions, it is semantically destructive.

Halfway through my freshman year of college, I decided it was time that I move out of my parents’ house. In order to do so, I would have to hire someone to help me with daily tasks that I could not complete on my own. In order to hire someone, however, I would need to be able to

pay. Fortunately, a friend directed me to a state-funded organization that would not only foot the entire bill but also pair me up with an aide agency. I applied for the program and, soon after, received a letter regretfully denying me services. Their listed reason was “nature of disease.” While doctors never could pinpoint which protein I was lacking that resulted in my having Muscular Dystrophy, they had to pin me down for insurance purposes. Muscular Dystrophy is a degenerative disease, clustered together with dementia, Alzheimer’s, and essentially, old age. The government was not prepared to give money to someone whose disease involved deteriorating. They were not prepared to give money to someone who might die soon. I was not a smart investment.

If identity is a key concern of disability studies, then we should consider Lennard Davis’ article, “Who Put the “The” in “The Novel”?: Identity Politics and Disability in Novel Studies.” In it, he considers disability and identity specifically through the lens of the novel genre. The article starts out as a look into “the” novel as a genre, particularly in the context of its identity, emphasized by the prefix “the,” which seems traditionally innate in novelism and which he argues may limit the genre. And then, in an attempt to theorize identity itself, Davis delves into the specific construct of the identity of disability, especially in relation to disabled characters in literature. He makes a brief mention of a few of them—Quasimodo, Tiny Tim, and Esther Summeron, among others—but focuses on the fact that disability as a minority is what he calls a “porous category;” one that is not exclusive or fixed to only the people that belong to it in the moment, but which can include and exclude different people at different times in their lives. It is not an exclusively biological category, nor is it necessarily determined at birth (321). I argue that this “porousness” is a component in the roots of the disabled label. We are often afraid of that

which is different, even if it is not altogether harmful. Suddenly acquiring a disability is popularly believed to have the potential to be harmful, at least to a person's usual routine and lifestyle. Thus, it is not surprising that society has implemented the idea of a strict dichotomy between the able-bodied and the disabled. An able-bodied person can only label herself such because she is without a disability. And if she is without a disability, she is further cemented as "normal" and **not** disabled. But people don't normally advertise themselves as able-bodied. The binary is only addressed when "disabled" is the tag in question. The label of "able-bodied" is not the comfort; the comfort rests in others being disabled.

One day, during the summer before I turned eighteen, I chaperoned my sisters to the community pool. I had no intentions of swimming, but I had dressed as though I might, in an attempt to sunbathe. As this sort of attire is usually hypersexualized, I was not surprised to notice one of the neighborhood boys in the pool eyeing me strangely from time to time. His friend, however, found his behavior unacceptable. After some shoving and splashing on their part, I heard the friend shout, "You have a crush on the cripple?" The boy got angry and didn't answer, so the friend prodded again and said, "Maybe you're a cripple too." At the first statement, I wasn't insulted, but felt bad for the young boy being mocked. The second statement provoked my interest. Was mere association with a girl in a wheelchair enough to demean this boy? Was infectious spread of my disability truly a concern? Surely, in their adult lives, these boys would not continue to think that the next person they saw in a wheelchair would contaminate them with disability. But if their thinking wasn't reversed soon, I felt sure that they would continue to avoid having affection for cripples.

A fear was shared between both boys that interacting with a disabled person would result in their own disability, and fear is a powerful motivator. A dichotomy arises in order to draw a distinction between the self and the other. I am *this* therefore I cannot be *that*. I am disabled therefore I cannot be able-bodied. But because this category is “porous,” a second fear arises that the dichotomy cannot soothe. If you can become disabled at any moment, one must always be alert and thus cannot rest. I often wonder if people stare at me and are made uncomfortable by my wheelchair because they are afraid to consider themselves in the same state. Furthermore, Davis argues that unlike race, religion, sexuality and other constructions of minority, it is impossible to draw clear borders around the category of disability because it’s too subjective. A poor speller might consider himself disabled because his misspellings “limit one or more of his daily life activities.” But someone else would tote around a dictionary and call it a quirk. I believe that it’s more appropriate to think of disability as placed on a spectrum instead of either side of a fence.

Amy Hollywood offers another perspective, not necessarily at the definition of disability but at the label as a construct. Her article, “The Normal, the Queer, and the Middle Ages,” looks transhistorically and theoretically at the idea of the “norm” or the “normative,” pointing out that the dichotomy of “normal” versus “abnormal,” as it applies to the human body (sexuality, in particular), doesn’t statistically appear until the nineteenth century (174). This suggests that normalcy isn’t an innate human categorization, but one that occurred because of changing ideals, further suggesting that “normal” and “abnormal” are social constructs, so far as they pertain to disability. Moreover, Hollywood makes a strategic connection between disability studies and queer theory. The two categories or labels are socially constructed products of modern social sensibility. But in terms of experience and subjectivity, there are vast differences that can’t

always be elided. Thus, while the connection may be useful in terms of legitimizing the place of disability studies in the academy, it also highlights the differences that exist and the distinctiveness of disability as an identity to study.

Another interesting approach comes from “So Long as They Grow Out of it: Comics, the Discourse of Developmental Normalcy, and Disability.” In the article, Susan Squier begins with the idea that a prolonged enjoyment of comics—in an adult, for instance—could be the sign of a developmental disability (72). This idea isn’t one that she necessarily supports, but she brings it into the dialogue to show the association between comics and disability that already exists. Squier’s definition of disability is particularly relevant to my arguments in this essay; she is involved in both the medical aspect and the cultural aspect by profession, yoking together the scientific and humanitarian disciplines. Her definition is therefore more considerate of both sets of ramifications. She distinguishes between “impairment—the individual limitation linked to a medically based problem that impairs one or more basic life functions—and disability—the individual limitation produced by society’s failure to accommodate to the impairment” (73). Additionally, “impairment” functions socially, while the “disability” is *embodied*. These two points seem contradictory, but the former relates more to the cause and the latter, the effect. The impairment is viewed as something abnormal about the body, but abnormality is a societal classification, thus impairment functions socially. Disability, however, becomes so inextricably associated with the person who is labeled by it that it is often embodied. Squier also brings up the idea that disability studies as a field is splitting or, at the very least, evolving into a field that increasingly is being driven by humanistic approaches and concerns and less so by medical or scientific ones. Furthermore, disabilities are now being viewed not as in need of a biological cure, but a *social* one that can fix the *social* gaze rather than the impairment.

From a completely different angle—and as the title suggests—Marian Corker’s “Sensing Disability” condones developing a sensibility in place of concrete denotation, thereby almost negating the need for a definition (36). Rather than taking a calculated, logical approach, Corker calls for a better *sense* of what it means to be disabled, on the part of both the disabled and non-disabled world. Furthermore, she focuses very much on the “value” of disabled people and the ontological shortcomings of using the binary labels of disabled/non-disabled. To continue, Corker connects disability theory to feminist theory, specifically in terms of the construct of monstrosity and the female body and the idea that identity can be defined through pathology (37). Though such an idea might make the water surrounding disability’s definition a little murkier, it shows that the study is interdisciplinary and therefore relevant to the concerns of multiple fields.

And not all hope is lost; at the moment, the strongest connection made by the field of disability studies is its relationship to gender and sexuality studies. Tom Koch’s article, “Disability and Difference: Balancing Social and Physical Constructions” adopts an interdisciplinary approach and points out that, “the world of disability theory is currently divided between those who insist it reflects a physical fact affecting life quality and those who believe disability is defined by social prejudice” (370). While the field is interdisciplinary, the debate between these two perspectives continues and, as far as Koch is concerned, threatens its development.

In “Critical Divides: Judith Butler’s Body Theory and the Question of Disability,” Ellen Samuels calls for a re-appropriation of Judith Butler’s theories of the body and of gender onto the structure of disablism. Samuels states that many of Butler’s concepts of the body, particularly the female body—like its (dis)empowerment—can be related to the disabled body (59).

Furthermore, she suggests that the disabled body should be studied alongside and concurrent with feminist considerations. But she warns against simply replacing the word “female” with the word “disabled” as though the latter can be exchanged with the former to produce the same academic and sociocultural results. The reduction of the issues and experiences of disability to those of gender and sexuality is problematic not only for the field of disability studies but also for those of gender and sexuality. The discourse of each of these areas shares similar investments and there are overlapping concerns, specifically in the context of social construction of identity and the propagation of socially determined devices of marginalization, but this does not necessarily mean that the two studies can be interchanged.

So while it can be damaging if taken to an extreme, placing disability studies alongside disciplines that have already been legitimized might be one way of solidifying it. In their article, “Res(crip)ting Feminist Theater Through Disability Theater: Selections from the DisAbility Project,” Anne Fox and Joan Lipkin look at disability studies through the lens of the theater, using the same process that has been used to address women’s roles in the history of the theater. It deals sufficiently with the aesthetics of disability and points out that, rather than just looking at gender, race or religion, the image of disability on-stage demands that the viewer and all who are involved question identity as a fluid, changing concept (82). Its suggestion that disability studies and women’s studies would work most efficiently together follows suit with most other literature, but makes a solid case for it by using the theater as a tangible and artistic apparatus on which to support itself. I would argue that disabled people should play more of a role, quite literally, in the performance arts and the consequences of excluding them is something that I will address further in my study via a popular television series.

An additional parallel can be drawn, this time between disability studies and queer theory, which emerged from women's and gender studies. There seems to be a development, then, in cultural studies, wherein diverse areas of identity studies share a common denominator (a lowest common denominator, as it were). Groups that have historically been placed on the lower rungs of the hierarchy of worth that Davis elucidates are coming into a position of authority within the academy. The points of convergence of these various cultural studies represent similar struggles between the groups in question. Robert McRuer showcases this in his article, "Crip Eye for the Normate Guy: Queer Theory and the Disciplining of Disability Studies," but he seems much more invested and interested in the aesthetics of disabilities, especially in the context of photography and the visual arts. The opening of the article is particularly insightful, listing the four traditional ways that disabled individuals are represented in the visual arts: the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and the realistic (586). It connects back to queer theory through a reference to the television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, drawing an obvious parallel to the fetishism of both queers and cripples and perhaps emphasizing the influence of popular culture. Fox and Lipkin bring this up in their article as well, when they point out that stereotypical characterizations of the disabled (i.e. "insidious," "innocent," "overcomer," etc.) are "more widespread in popular literature and the mass media, [thus] to analyze these characterizations is no less monumental or important a task awaiting disability studies scholars" (81).

Tobin Siebers addresses similar issues through the lens of art in his article "Disability Aesthetics." Though short, the piece is full of considerations of the beauty/ugliness dichotomy as it relates to disabilities, which is relatively anomalous—in all of the literature I encountered, aesthetics seems to be a topic that many writers avoid, perhaps out of a fear of superficiality.

While the scholars may or may not be avoiding the aesthetic discussion of disability, the social ramifications of disability (the definitions included) are based on the gaze. As insistent as Marian Corker may be about using other senses to perceive disability, the fact remains that a disability is most readily apparent when there is visual proof. That is to say, a person who parks in a handicapped accessible space and then exits her vehicle and visibly limps has an “obvious” right to the space. Onlookers are then obligated to look away as soon as the disability and need for the space is confirmed. The individual that parks in the handicapped space whose disability is invisible is subjected to the onlooker’s gaze, and perhaps judgment. Reclaiming that gaze is part of what disability theorists’ agenda is; in crude terms, we must transform the body of the socially determined object into the transformative body of the self-determined subject. The avoidance of the aesthetics of disability in some ways presents an incomprehensive approach to the field because it promotes the taboo of staring at a person with a disability. But even so, the article doesn’t focus on the day-to-day aesthetics of disability. It is situated, instead, within art and particularly modern art’s use of disability to create a more powerful statement. The basic idea is that disability as an aesthetic gives a piece of art longevity and helps it to avoid kitsch (Siebers uses perfectionistic Nazi artwork as an example) because it transgresses trends and temporary ideas of “beauty” and “normalcy” (543-544). While I condone the inclusion of the disabled body in visual arts, I would like to see it represented for its own merits and not for its utility in avoiding kitsch.

Another piece of literature concerned with the artistic representation of disabled individuals comes from Fiona Whittington-Walsh. Her main argument, as articulated in her essay “From Freaks to Savants: Disability and Hegemony from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939) to *Sling Blade* (1997),” presents her case against the banishment of the film *Freaks*. Directed by

Tod Browning in 1932, the film showcases “freak show” performers. The film was poorly received and vaulted away for decades. Whittington-Walsh tries to uncover the real motivation for it, and in doing so, brings up some interesting points about society’s reception and perception of disabled and deformed individuals. This is primarily done by analyzing the representations of disabled characters in two films: *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939) and *Sling Blade* (1997). What is perhaps most interesting about this article is its focus on society’s exploitation of disabled and deformed individuals for entertainment and capital gain, as in the case of the “freak show” (696). This is an angle that I’d really like to take advantage of as I consider my own thesis because it suggests a positive, if also slightly manipulated view of disabled individuals, wherein their disability is their advantage and is valued, to some extent, by the able-bodied population.

Diane Arbus does something similar with photography of the odd and unusual body. She reorients the gaze: rather than freakifying the disabled body (as monstrous or hideous), she repositions the viewer to inhabit the world within which the disabled body operates and circulates. She focuses on the domestic sphere and the mundane attachments of the everyday, thereby deconstructing the social gaze that typically inscribes onto the disabled body the tropes of deformity and abnormality. Her photo *Jewish Giant at Home with His Parents in the Bronx, N.Y.C.* (1970) showcases the titular individual in humanized environment, which requires the viewer to reposition their perception of the disabled body. It becomes increasingly difficult to place an individual on the outskirts of society when he is standing in his living room with his family.

The final identity study that I analyze involves ageism—separate, in distinction and practice within the academy, but often concurrent with disability studies. In her essay, “Old Age and Ageism, Impairment and Ableism: Exploring the Conceptual and Material Connections,”

Christine Overall points out yet another identity/minority study area that runs alongside with disability studies. What is perhaps most interesting in Overall's analysis is her suggestion and use of the solid reputation of disability studies, which she appropriates to legitimize the emerging field of age studies and its investment in ageism. In both the abstract and the opening paragraph of the article, Overall places disability studies (in this case referred to as ableism) prior to ageism on the page (126). Her listing suggests that disability studies is increasingly recognized as a mainstream discourse within the fields of cultural and identity studies. Just as, several decades ago, queer studies posited itself as an offshoot or rhizomatic growth of the larger and more general field of gender and sexuality studies, so too age studies posits itself as a development of specialized studies that focus on varying aspects and nuances of identity politics and practices. The methodology adopted by Overall, then, presents disability studies as an already established field of study, a field which in turn can lead to the extraction and extrapolation from it of other forms of evaluating the formations of identity, including but not limited to that of age studies.

This all culminates in the question of disability studies' staying power as a field. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's talk, "Compulsory Feral-ization: Institutionalizing Disability Studies" does a lot to address this. The title isn't the only evocative thing Mitchell and Snyder have to offer. Their work looks at the current status of disability studies within the institution and suggests that more detail isn't necessarily what the field is lacking (i.e., more specifics on different disabilities, different struggles, different definitions). Rather, the talk suggests a macrocosmic, rather than micro, approach in the attempt to legitimize it as a field. Anything else, they argue, may devolve the study into a "feral" state (627). But that's not the only connection to the feral. The academy's fetish surrounding "feral children" in the 18th and 19th centuries is something that Mitchell and Snyder see as a potential threat to disability studies, if it is not

approached in a comprehensive way. Mitchell and Snyder also call for an addition of disabled individuals into the discourse and research community of disability studies—“not because people with disabilities inherently know the truth of their own social and biological lives but because their visible entry into the discourse of their bodies makes all speaking positions in the field shift and grow necessarily self-conscious” (633).

An inappropriate approach isn't the only threat to disability studies; the manipulation of the study is dangerous as well. Catherine Kudlick's article, “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other,’” claims to take an historical look at disability studies within identity theory, but above all else, reads as an encouragement of poaching. Kudlick asserts “one need not identify oneself as disabled in order to reap the benefits of this up-and-coming field” (764). While I consider the involvement of able-bodied individuals in the field not only acceptable, but also necessary, Kudlick's word choice suggests that disability studies is like real estate up for auction. Furthermore, the reference to the disabled as the titular “other” reads as overly certain, shortsighted, and degrading. Kudlick seems to regard disability as a trendy way to be or a trendy field to study and misses entirely the actual importance and relevance of the minority and the need to better familiarize society with its implications beyond the physical difficulties it presents. In what strikes me as an attempt to sell the field to potential investors, Kudlick offers various ways that “disability studies” can be molded to suit assorted branches of historical study (766-767). More than anything, I feel as if Kudlick tries to claim a bit of territory for the historical discipline in the field of disability studies. She makes reference to its importance in literary and philosophical studies, but insists that it would be a great new “other”—an aspect of social construction that has always fascinated scholars. If nothing else, this article serves as a subject of commentary on interdisciplinary views of disability theory, even if its angle is distorted. I am of

the opinion that disability studies is inextricably linked with various fields, including history, so I think that Kudlick's intentions are well placed. I disagree, however, with her approach to the field and its novelty. Put simply, no study or field emerges with the purpose of being claimed, and suggesting that such an approach is acceptable places an external value on the work being done which should have its own, intrinsic value.

The various and varied scholarly works, several of which I have outlined above, contribute to the growing engagements in the study of disability as a cultural dimension of identity. However, what I think is as yet undertheorized and most promising for the future of the field is the personal testimony and experience of disabled individuals. It is this development that will bring about a social consciousness of disability as experience and not simply as condition. Admittedly, an anecdotal or experiential approach can make homogeneity within the study difficult, but as Katherine Runswick-Cole and Dan Goodley's article proves, worthwhile. "The Violence of Disablism" flips the traditional association between the terms "disabled" and "violence" on its head. Oftentimes, when the two words are in contact with one another, it results in the disabled being violent or having a violent nature—think back to the story of criminalization of the disabled condition at the start of the essay. Instead, the article considers the much more prevalent and concerning notion of violence aimed *at* the disabled (602-603). In terms of my work, the relevance lies in the effects that semantics can have on disability and the predispositions surrounding the behavior of those that fall under the category.

Also approached in terms of personal testimony, Myriam Winance's article "Trying out the Wheelchair: The Mutual Shaping of People and Devices through Adjustment" takes a look at the influence of relationships (both human and non-human) on disabled people. Winance uses case studies to make her points and takes a very empirical approach to the concept of the

relationship between the central cases (like “Mrs. Atti” and her manual wheelchair), providing statistical data and precise details about who was involved at every step of the process of finding a new, more comfortable wheelchair (56). Though this paper takes a primarily humanitarian approach, the cold analysis of these actions brings to the surface the notion of a learned process of living that non-disabled individuals are never obligated to ascertain. Thus, a humanitarian lens can be placed over Winance’s article to elucidate an entirely new layer of understanding.

I realize that all of this might sound somewhat flippant or conceptual, but disability studies as a field needs fleshed out a little more. It’s relatively new. As happens with most emerging fields, scholars are eager to partake and I believe that this is of great benefit. But I worry that, in the process of legitimizing disability studies, the humanity at its foundation may get lost. Theorizing the disabled body and identity is vital, but analyzing the way that it is perceived and represented in common, daily life might shine a more pragmatic light on the study. As a disabled student, I have little desire to hear about the ways that my able-bodied classmates subjectively project my disability on to me because they are uncomfortable with that which is unfamiliar to them. But I realize that this is necessary. I only wish that afterwards, they could read a poem written by a guy with no legs or watch a silent video produced by girl who lost her hearing as a young child. This rarely happens and, when it doesn’t, I feel obligated to offer a story of my own. But because such action becomes my responsibility, I must separate myself from the student role and enter into that of the crippled protagonist.

When I was a child and in the process of being diagnosed, my family and I had to make bi-weekly trips to a children’s hospital in Cincinnati that better suited my advanced needs. From our small town, the trip took three and a half hours and more gas money than we could really

afford, but we made do. As time passed and my well being seemed more stable, one parent or the other would make the trek with me alone in an effort to minimize the disruption to my sisters' lives. Often, this meant a lot of one-on-one time with my mother.

After a specific trip, at the age of thirteen, she asked me how I would feel if they ever found a cure. I didn't like the idea. Who are "they" anyway? Doctors? Experts? Certainly people who knew my body and my condition better than I did, right? But what a hassle a cure would be...so much time spent in and out of hospitals, so many medications, and so many IVs. I hated IVs. But after four years of lost childhood, I didn't hate my disability anymore. The wheelchair was comfortable and got me where I needed to go. Life was by no means easy and I was aware that it would likely never be simple, but I was adapting and I was content. Besides, whose life is simple or easy?

So I told my mother that I wouldn't take a cure if it were ever offered and she was shocked. But eight years later, I feel the same way. My disability gives me an interesting perspective on the world; some people search their whole lives for an uncommon angle like that. And I think it would be more philanthropic to live a satisfying life with a disability than to concede that I do, in fact, need fixing in order to be happy.

I worry that our "fix-it" culture leaves little room for adaptation. I don't pretend to believe that my personal struggle against the physical norm will influence a significant change in mindset, but even at thirteen, I was vaguely aware that a cure felt like a forfeit and I could manage a much better life (and story) without one.

II. Applications and Representations

A Rant Against Artie Abrams

Characters with disabilities, be it in literature, film, television, or any other form of art, are often portrayed as outcasts, or as significant owing only to their disabilities. Let us consider, for example, the character of Artie Abrams, a paraplegic high school student from the popular television show *Glee*. Approximately 7-8 million people watch the show on a weekly basis, an important statistic to keep in mind as we consider just how many individuals are exposed to this show's representation of disability. In the episode entitled "Wheels," Abrams is kept from attending a performance competition because his school can't afford to rent a handicapped-accessible bus. When the necessary funds are raised, Abrams donates the money to the construction of ramps to improve the school for future disabled students. The fictional McKinley High is supposed to be a public school in Ohio; in reality, the institution would be legally obligated to provide the accessible bus on a day-to-day basis, but this is overlooked, arguably done so in order to set up the episode's primary conflict and to put the character in the position of being charitable. The important thing to note is that, like usual, the character with the disability is portrayed as saint-like, a common trope that avoids getting to the complex moral implications of having a physical disability. The implicit remark made in the episode, which echoes the romantic treatments of various other narratives, *Hunchback* included, is that the disabled character needs to be celebrated as an individual who is more sensitive than most others are to human emotions and needs. The disabled individual, moreover, is drawn out as a hero (or a side-kick styled hero) specifically because of his or her ability to put others before the self. Autonomy, in other words, in the case of the disabled being—at least in shows such as *Glee*—is not so much a matter of individual identity as it is that of self-disposal and self-dismissal, in a word of sacrifice. A new moral standard is set for the disabled individual to live up to and I question if that's entirely fair. The episode ends with the entire glee club performing a rendition

of “Proud Mary,” accompanied by choreography in wheelchairs. I can only imagine the controversy that would ensue if the group had donned blackface in support of their African American member. The show creates a feel good moment for the audience in order to capitalize on notions of equality and acceptance, but the result is an overly simplified narrative and a problematic representation and appropriation of the disabled body that pins Abrams into a saintly character.

Fortunately, it seems that critics of the show have picked up on this same stereotyping of the character in a wheelchair. But what’s most disappointing is what they all seemed to love. The person who portrays Abrams (Kevin McHale) is an able-bodied actor and singer with a penchant for dancing. Some reviews criticize the casting choice, suggesting that it takes a role away from the community of actors with disabilities. But not a single review that I have encountered criticizes “Dream On,” the episode wherein Abrams dreams that he no longer needs his wheelchair and is able to walk. In the dream, he performs a dance routine and, once awake, admits that he has aspirations of being a dancer. Critics praised McHale’s performance as they had never praised him before. Bryan Alexander of NBC went so far as to title his online article, “It’s a Miracle! Kevin McHale Dances on ‘Glee’” (Alexander). What’s disturbing and most relevant to this paper is that positive reception occurred once the disability was out of the picture. Not only in the episode, but in the world of television review as well, the wheelchair and the disability were obstacles, confining McHale and underutilizing his talents.

During my final year of undergraduate studies, I took a course on the history of the body and the development of modern Western medicine. One of the segments of the course focused on the disabled body, in particular, and the stigmas attached to it, medically speaking. The

professor posed the following question: is it ethically permissible to abort a fetus to save it from suffering from a disability? Some students reacted negatively to the suggestion, insisting that such a premise was no more defensible than the sexist act of aborting a fetus because it was female. But one student in particular defended the idea. I admit to paraphrasing, but I recall her points with clarity.

“If you’re saving the parents from the added expenses and the child from a life of suffering, it almost seems like a mercy,” she said.

I calmly raised my hand and explained that genetic screening would have indicated to my parents that I would be born with a disability. What’s more, had it not been specified which type of Muscular Dystrophy I have, statistics would have suggested that I would not live to my eighteenth birthday. But I’m grateful they never thought of taking such atrocious actions. I value my life dearly. I may be in a wheelchair, but I do not suffer because of it. I support myself financially and was no more of a drain on my parents’ income as a child than either of my able-bodied sisters was. To appropriate the abortion of a potentially disabled fetus is to commit a grievous act of ableism. I’m all too thankful that no one thrust such “mercy” upon me.

Abrams’ interactions with the other characters aren’t much better than his relationship with critics. In the “Wheels” episode, he goes on a date with another glee club member who has a stutter because he feels that they share a connection through their disabilities. She later reveals that she’s been faking the stutter since she was a child, which makes him angry; not because she’s been lying to him and everyone else, but because she’s pretending to struggle with something he really does. Later, in the “Dream On” episode, she learns that he dreams of being a dancer and tries to cheer him up by showing him recent research in the field of spinal cord injury

treatments. Rather than become frustrated at her suggestion that “fixing” his disability would solve all of his problems, he seems genuinely appreciative and hopeful that maybe he *can* one day become a dancer. What is uncritical here is the idea that fixing or removing a person’s disability solves that person’s problems or is the only way for them to lead a personally satisfying life. But the experience of disability is a full and complete one, which does not need fixing or amending unless it is a matter of individual and autonomous desire, although I hope that said desire is not the result of the social pressure to be “normal” or have what others advertise and a full life. What is problematic about *Glee* and the many shows that are like it is that it normalizes the social consciousness of disability *as* incompleteness. This normalizing process has led to assumptions about disability that inscribe themselves within the human and social imagination, so much so that they come to be everyday practices and mindsets. But this is not to be confused with the normalizing that a person with a disabled body might aspire to, in regards to a desire for perfection or fullness or completeness in other ways. Put simply, we have adopted tropes that allow us to say to friends, “it is normal for you to wish to be someone other than who you are, but only because you are disabled.” All other forms of desiring the transformation of identity—those of race, gender, sexuality, and class—are scorned upon as oppressive efforts to fit in when we should be embracing our individuality.

I once had a classmate and friend relate the following to me: “I saw a girl who used in a wheelchair in the hallway a minute ago,” he said. “At first I thought it was you, but then I realized it wasn’t. Then I decided that you pull off the wheelchair thing much better than her.” At first, I was appalled. What did he mean by “pulling off the wheelchair?” It’s not an outfit that I pick out of my closet in the morning in hopes that someone might compliment me.

But then I understood what he was implying. A few days later, I approached him and resurrected the comment. I told him that I assumed he meant it positively and that his suggestion wasn't that I looked better in a wheelchair or drove my wheelchair more smoothly. Rather, being disabled is a performance and the world's a stage, as Shakespeare would suggest. I can personify the saintly stereotype or the helpless one. I can be bitter or religiously inclined to believe in my own redemption during the afterlife. Or I can forego the melodrama and aim for something a little more genuine.

Oscar Pistorius and the Olympics

One of the most widely covered stories of the 2012 Olympics was that of Oscar Pistorius, a South African track athlete and bilateral amputee. Prior to Olympic coverage, Pistorius was not widely known outside of the world of track and field. But on the night of his 400-metre semi-final race, Pistorius' name was the 8th most discussed item on the social media network Twitter, indicating a rise in recognition for the somewhat controversial athlete. I label him controversial for regrettable reasons and only because his journey to the Olympics was not without obstacles. Pistorius was, at one point, banned from competing against able-bodied runners because it was thought that his prosthetics gave him an advantage. The primary concern of the International Association of Athletic Federations (IAAF) was that the prosthetics enhanced his endurance, and thus they made an amendment (reportedly not directed at him) which banned "any technical device that incorporates springs, wheels or any other element that provides a user with an advantage over another athlete not using such a device" (134, rule 144.2). The Court of Arbitration for Sport reversed the decision of his exclusion after finding that he gained no net advantage over able-bodied runners because of his prosthetics and he was given the opportunity

to compete in Beijing. However, his times did not qualify him against other South African sprinters and he did not participate. Instead, he trained and after four years, qualified for the 2012 London Olympics.

It seems odd to me that a man without his own legs and even with replacement legs, so to speak, should have any advantage over runners with their own legs, especially in a sport that focuses so much on the lower limbs. But as I'm neither a doctor nor scientist, I cannot say what would and would not prove advantageous to the performance of a body. And as someone who can't even walk, I certainly couldn't tell you what makes running easier. But what I can comment on is the reaction the media have had to Pistorius' Olympic debut and how that reaction may prove harmful or beneficial to the societal perception of disability.

Pistorius' first appearance in televised coverage took place during his 400m qualifying heat. He beat his fastest time for the season and crossed the line second, easily qualifying for the semi-final race. His disability wasn't mentioned in his post-race interview and was only alluded to indirectly when the interviewer mentioned that South Africa had ruled to allow him to run in the relay race that would take place later in the games. But afterward, when the newsroom commentator from NBC was transitioning to commercial, he reflected on the race by saying that, "Clearly Oscar Pistorius is not just here to take the start command, he is here to really make his mark."¹ First of all, I would argue that it is impressive for any person to make it to the Olympics, amputee, double amputee, or seemingly perfect specimen of the human body. The clear implication—based on the processes of competition and elimination—is that the athletes representing their nations at the Olympics are among the best in the world and are the best at what they do. Pistorius is not "making a mark" just because he is an amputee. His circumstances

¹ <http://www.nbcolympics.com/video/track-and-field/top-nbc-moment-oscar-pistorius-advances-in-400m.html>

may suggest that he has had a more difficult time of getting where he is, but like any of the other people on the track, he's an athlete. And of course he competed; it's not as if competing in the Olympics was his Make-A-Wish request. He competed against others in his country, he beat their times, performed better than others and thus proved himself deserving of the chance to run against the best sprinters in the world. His heat winning time in the Men's 400m clocked in at a personal best of 45.44 seconds.² The Olympic winning time was a record broken by Kirani James 43.94 seconds.³ Based on objective analysis, Pistorius made his mark first and foremost as an athlete. The fetishizing of his body is more a symptom of the refusal of social media (and society at large) to perceive difference as mundane fact. Rather, social media (and society at large) can only comprehend—or choose only to comprehend—the athlete as a spectacle, a miraculous and remarkable body that is made all the more remarkable owing to its “imperfect” appearance. The social gaze, since it can't be averted from the athletes who put their bodies on competitive display organizes itself around the celebration of exception. While it may be normal to perceive the disabled body as lacking even in mere functionality, Pistorius' body, then comes to be glorified as the representative body of exception—this is what it means to be gifted and motivated. This is what it means for a *disabled* man to “makes his mark.”

But then the question of “did he really?” arises. There is an obvious stigma attached to the disabled individual, whether he or she chooses to act according to it or not. I can attest from personal experience that I've wondered more than once if I truly earned what I had or if it was given to me out of pity or sympathy. I once went to a baseball game and the team that I didn't much care for thought it would be nice to bring me the game ball after all of the players had signed it. There was no obvious reason for such a gesture and, while it was kind, it was

² Men's 400m Round 1 Results: <http://www.london2012.com/athletics/event/men-400m/phase=atm004900/index.html>

³ Men's 400m Final Results <http://www.london2012.com/athletics/event/men-400m/index.html>

unsolicited and reeked of pity. I've even had friends and been involved in relationships where I've wondered if the individuals really valued my company and personality or if they were only remaining by my side out of guilt. After all, what sort of person rejects a girl in a wheelchair? In a video compilation of talks on "First as Tragedy, Then as Farce," Slavoj Zizek calls into question the ways in which modern and postmodern societies have incorporated the rhetoric and gestures of charity so that consciousness and critical engagement are taken systemically out of the social dynamic:

People find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation. It is inevitable that they should be strongly moved by all this. Accordingly, with admirable though misdirected intentions, they very seriously and sentimentally set themselves to the task of remedying the evils that they see. But their remedies do not cure the disease; they merely prolong it. Indeed, their remedies are part of the disease...it is an aggravation of the difficulty. Charity degrades and demoralizes. (5:37-6:45)

Zizek's talk focuses on charity as it affects capitalism, but its effects on disabled people as a culture is just as "degrading." When the manager of the aforementioned baseball team gave me a signed ball, it was because he presupposed that I was sad or suffering from being in a wheelchair and that a special gift would help soothe my feelings. Or worse, he was glad to see me out and about like a normal member of society and the signed ball functioned like a reward or incentive to behave the same way again. Careful observation during the game would have shown the manager that I had little interest in his team but that the little boy three rows ahead of me was a zealous fan. As Zizek points out, this sort of charity only encourages the "disease" or, in this case, the presumptions surrounding the disabled experience. Moreover, the greatest purpose that an act of charity serves is to make the donor feel better—if I was suffering or sad, a baseball would do little to solve the problem.

So then it should be considered, even if it isn't true, that Pistorius might also face unearned positive bias. And the media, always looking for ways to increase viewers and ratings,

surely wouldn't pass up the opportunity for a heart-warming story like his. The bigger problem here is that such narratives of heart warmth and gush are embedded in ideologies of oppression and they are dangerous precisely because they pass as and for common sense and goodness. In the initial heats of the relay race, South Africa finished outside of qualifying position, effectively ending Pistorius' time spent in London. However, officials later ruled that a South African runner had been compromised by a runner from Kenya, thus disqualifying the country to make room for South Africa. In retrospect, it was probably an accurate call. But NBC surely didn't hesitate to air all sorts of coverage about the change and resurrect Pistorius' moving story. Just when we thought that his dreams of medaling were over, the hero gets another chance. Here we see the disabled individual sanctified and championed for their ability to inspire, but I would argue that after all of the trouble he's gone to, perhaps Pistorius would like to be championed for his ability. After all, he has been quoted as saying that, "you are not disabled by your disabilities but abled by your abilities." Note that this narrative is not unlike that of *Glee* wherein all of the characters do a dance that involves their passing as disabled. Whether art is imitating social media or vice versa, disability is always treated as a story—a tragedy, a farce, a romance; but always a story. But don't mistake my distaste for charity as a tirade against kindness. Take this afternoon, for instance.

December third, my final day of working on this piece and it has consisted mostly of revisions. A friend asked me if I would be sick of this study once I finished it and wondered if I would ever want to look at it again. The problem is that I don't much have the option. Everything I've written is, in a way, about me, thus it will be impossible to avoid thinking of it in the future. I

let that idea set alongside Zizek as I ventured across campus for lunch. The counter was a bit high, so I asked the cashier for a bit of help and she was more than happy to provide. As I was leaving, I realized I'd forgotten to get my fountain drink, probably because I knew I'd have to ask for help getting that as well and subconsciously, I was tired of needing assistance. I turned back around and reached for a cup with a stranger intercepted. "Can I get that for you?" he asked. I conceded, thanked him, and moved to grab my bag when he interrupted again. "Can I carry that to your table? I explained that I was heading back to the library with it and we commiserated about end of the semester stresses before I thanked him again and was on my way.

This was an appropriate exchange of assistance, and here's why: rather than asking if I would like help, he asked if he could get something for me. If I'm being honest, I never like help; sometimes it's necessary, but it's never the preferred method of getting something done. Instead, he asked if he could get something for me. He didn't ask me if I wanted help—help suggests that I can *almost* manage what I need to do but only need some extra assistance. In this instance, I just needed someone to do it for me. Moreover, he asked if he could do something. The use of "can" and its conjugations makes it feel as if the person is asking permission. It results in a sense of acknowledgement that the former phrase just doesn't relate. It's like saying, "I see that you need something done. I'm capable of doing it. I'm going to ask your permission to be of assistance, because you are an independent entity." Rather than suggesting that my need for help is a consequence of my disability, this considerate stranger approached the situation as if he was being a courteous person to another person. Pity was not involved.

The pity showing that Pistorius received during the 2012 Olympics isn't the worst the media has had to offer the athlete. In September of 2011, Rob Bonnet of BBC interviewed

Pistorius and asked if he felt like an “inconvenient embarrassment” to the South African authorities and the IAAF. The inconvenience was referring to what Bonnet called the “uncharted ethical territories” that Pistorius was pushing everyone toward, while the embarrassment seemed to be an embellishment of his own. Pistorius called the question an insult, said thank you, and walked out, even after Ronnet insisted that it wasn’t meant as such.

But what is a disabled person supposed to do when society insists that we’re all equal and that a disability doesn’t stop a person from achieving all they want when someone from the media, who is broadcasting a direct discussion about someone who has proved such a belief with his actions goes on air and calls the disabled person, because of their disability, an “inconvenient embarrassment?” I’ve fought against thinking that sort of thing about myself for years. When I was younger, I went shopping with my sister and my wheelchair caught the strap of a bra and pulled it off the rack. Mortified, I had to assure myself that it wasn’t a big deal and that I wasn’t some sort of “inconvenient embarrassment” to my sister. Nowadays, it’s more likely that my friends and I are trying to get a table in a restaurant and we have to wait ages for somewhere that I can sit since the bar is much too high. I chock it up to society’s narrow definition of “normal” and their assumption that bar height is suitable for everyone and I tell myself that if anyone should feel embarrassed, it should be the person that designed the restaurant. But really, that’s not fair either. The people responsible for these distorted perceptions of embarrassment and guilt via inconvenience are those with the mentality of Ronnet, who genuinely seems to consider a disabled athlete an “embarrassing inconvenience” to his sport; and who believes it so wholeheartedly that he doesn’t even suspect its insult.

Architecture functions in many of the same ways. One of the primary concerns of legislation concerning disabled individuals and their rights involves the accessibility of public

institutions and places of business, but the guidelines are rarely all-encompassing. And private places of residence tend to be even worse. The structure of the stair-step has long been a personal nemesis as it's often the only thing blocking my access. But when the aesthetic calls for winding staircases, heavy wooden doors, and intricate visual elements, the disabled body that can't ascend the staircase, open the doors, or see the delicately crafted wall hangings is inherently classified as unwelcome. A garden design may be gorgeous when you can walk the narrow paths and beneath the flowered archways, but if your wheelchair can't navigate the maze, you feel ostracized from the other visitors. And then, like Ronnet, those that design environments seem mostly either unaware of the lived experiences of disabled women and men or else embarrassed that they have to "accommodate" them into what could otherwise be celebrated as architectural and aesthetic dreamscapes.

III. For Future Reference

Is it acceptable that disabled individuals are underrepresented in disability studies as authority figures? Should personal understanding of what it is like to have a disability be more valuable than years spent studying disabilities, their various implications, and the people who have them? I don't have statistics—in fact, I doubt that such a thing exists—on how many scholars, academics, and professors of higher education are classified as "disabled." But from my own experience and observation at various universities, I'm inclined to say that most are able-bodied. This, of course, is generally speaking and only takes into consideration those who are, as Corker might put it, "sensationally" recognized as disabled. After all, one's disability is not necessarily something to be advertised and is rarely approached in most social situations. But more specifically, not many institutions offer a disability studies program, and in these lacking institutions, there are no populations of disabled disability scholars to consider. Other faculty and

scholars may be disabled, but I'm confident that even that percentage is low. What is the cause? More importantly, what is the effect?

I'm a fan of exposure therapy. If you have a fear, acquaint yourself with it. If there is an injustice, bring it to light. If students are never given an intelligent authority figure that is disabled, it comes as no surprise that they grow up and into an ableist mentality of which they are never critically conscious. They become an ableist workforce and an ableist media, all the while completely inattentive to how difficult it is for a person in a wheelchair to open a set of double doors and how most advertising is visual. Only once they've acquired a disability or a disabled friend are they suddenly aware of how inaccessible this ableist world is. But I am in no position to enlighten each person, one by one, to the struggles inherent to having a disability. It's simply not feasible. But I think the academy, particularly those involved in the humanities, can make it so. It may take a while to accumulate enough material for a "Literature in a Disabled Context" course, but the disabled community is not a control group to be studied and theorized from the periphery. We must delve in and get our hands dirty with emotion, confusion, and creativity if we ever hope to share the intricacies and complexities of a disabled lifestyle with the able-bodied world. Where is the disabled body in art? The Venus de Milo has no arms and she is revered for her beauty, but the implications of her deformity are largely ignored. Teach it in art history classes through the disabled lens. Henry David Thoreau writes of transcending into nature by walking in the woods, but how am I to participate in such lyrical beauty? What does the woman in search of illumination do if she cannot follow in Thoreau's footsteps? Am I prohibited because I cannot walk? Do I get special permission to roll through the woods? It doesn't have quite the same effect, does it?

Instead, I've decided to write myself into participation:

The Art of Walking

*I haven't told anyone this before,
but I like to watch you pace.
Perhaps it's because I can't anymore
and I want your natural grace.*

*I like to watch you pace.
I wear these shoes as part of the guise.
I want your natural grace
to replace these wasted thighs.*

*I wear these shoes as part of the guise
(this walking world requires acting of me).
To replace these wasted thighs,
I beg you share your strength. I plead.*

*This walking world requires acting of me.
What if I can't do it anymore?
I've lost my strength to beg or plead.
I haven't told anyone this before.*

I catch them staring all the time—moviegoers, mall-shoppers, and the like—but it's as though they think I'm Medusa. The moment I stare back, they freeze into stone. I wonder if they know that I don't mind them staring; I mind that they look away. Perhaps if they kept looking, they'd begin to understand.

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