

Disability Ecology: Re-Materializing U.S. Fiction from 1890-1940

By

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If cows and horses or lions had hands and could draw, then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, cows like cows, making their bodies similar in shape to their own.

Xenophanes

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Dedication

For Shana, Edith, and Oscar

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Abstract

Disability Ecology: Re-Materializing U.S. Fiction from 1890-1940 argues that disability is the material-semiotic product of an ecological network of human and non-human actors. As social forms, disability ecologies move across contexts, including the non-literary and the literary, to structure disability subjectivities, attach meaning to textualizations of nonnormative embodiments, and produce other effects particular to a given milieu. The introduction, “Returning to Bodies: Disability, Ecology, and Literary Disability,” proposes a model of disability that is distinct from extant essentialist and social models for the equal agentic capacities it grants to nonnormative embodiments and to cultural actors. Chapter one, “Disability, Subjects, Ecology,” develops the concepts of disability ecology and its relationship to disability subjectivities, and it argues that the disability ecologies in literary texts act as heuristics for the examination of the actors that structure disability subjectivities. Chapter two, “The Spectacular Banality of Literary Disability,” theorizes how the deployment of disability for egalitarian ends in realist fiction by William Dean Howells and Charles Chesnutt in fact produces discursive subjugation. Chapter three, “Biopolitical Aesthetics and the Crip Gesture of Naturalism,” coordinates analyses of proto-eugenic practices of medical classification that depended on biopolitical aesthetic criteria and the aesthetic projects of naturalist fiction by Frank Norris and Edith Wharton that reify subordinating concepts of disability even as they

foreground impairment as a universal condition of human being. Chapter four, “Disability Kitsch, Literary Inclusionism, and the Crip Art of Aesthetic Failure,” argues that representations of disability in literary art tend toward kitsch, yet as kitsch such representations wield an expressive power that marginalizing discourses cannot contain. Through analyses of texts by Willa Cather and Ernest Hemingway, the chapter further develops an idea of post-thematic disability aesthetics, meaning the application of disability themes to experimental literary forms in the absence of representation.

INTRODUCTION

Returning to Bodies: Disability, Ecology, and Literary Disability

Bodies and works of art are material objects, and only as such can they be bearers of meaning; but because they are inherently semiotic entities, they can never be reduced to the materiality which is the condition of their signification.

Terry Eagleton, "Bodies, Artworks, and Use Values"

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue.

Henry James, "The Art of Fiction"

In 2004 the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals denied the request of Jose Garcia Briseño, a death row inmate who has intellectual disabilities, to have his capital sentence overturned.¹ Briseño was sentenced to death in June, 1992, for his role in the murder of Ben Murray, the Sheriff of Dimmit County, Texas, on January 5, 1991 (Office of the Attorney General of the State of Texas). Briseño's attorneys argued that his sentence should be reduced based upon a

¹ In 2013, Briseño's sentence was reduced to life in prison without the chance for parole.

² Between 2001 and 2015, Texas executed 292 death row inmates, averaging just fewer than twenty executions per year. At the time of this writing in June 2016, Texas has executed six death row inmates, accounting for almost half

then-recent Supreme Court ruling, *Atkins v. Virginia* (2002), that establishes a protection from capital punishment for people with intellectual disabilities under the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, commonly referred to as the “cruel and unusual amendment.”

The majority opinion in *Atkins* references diagnostic criteria commonly used by the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) and the American Psychiatric Association as models for determining intellectual disability, but the ruling explicitly reserves for individual states the right to establish their own diagnostic criteria. Instead of relying on AAMR and APA criteria, *Briseño* achieves its outcomes using vernacular social metrics, not research-based ones. The majority opinion, written by Justice Cathy Cochran, establishes an idiosyncratic set of seven criteria, known colloquially as the Briseño factors, that focuses exclusively on *perceptions* of the offender held by his or her family and friends to determine mental health. By adopting these criteria, *Ex Parte Briseño* circumvents the protections granted in *Atkins* and establishes a diagnostic precedent grounded in intersubjective opinion for determining an offender’s degree of intellectual disability and, therefore, fitness for execution. Despite the Supreme Court reaffirming *Atkins* in *Hall v. Florida* (2014), *Briseño* has been invoked as recently as January 2015 to justify the execution of violent offenders with documented intellectual disabilities.

The open-ended questions that constitute the Briseño factors generate an ambiguous interpretive horizon in which intellectual disability appears as the unstable product of intersubjective deliberation. For example, the criteria includes questions that ask if “family, friends, teachers, employers, authorities” *thought* that the offender “was mentally retarded [sic] at that time [of the offense], and, if so, act[ed] in accordance with that determination” (Court of Criminal Appeals of Texas). Such questions imply that classification—and the life or death

consequence this specific classification entails—depends on the perception of people who may have no knowledge of the complex range of intellectual disabilities, who may be unaware or unable to recognize any perceptible symptoms that may be present, or who may not know that many forms of intellectual disability are not discernible through casual observation. Given general concerns about the disproportionate capital sentencing of minority offenders and the recent use of DNA evidence to exonerate many who have been unfairly convicted—six former death row inmates were exonerated in the U.S. in 2015 alone (Death Penalty Information Center)—the indeterminacy at the center of the *Briseño* factors presents a challenge to public perception, to impaneled jurors, and to the offender.

Lest future jurists waver when confronted by the unmarked field on which *Briseño* contests classification, the majority opinion includes a description of an intellectually disabled subject who *should* be beyond the reach of the death penalty. “By virtue of his lack of reasoning ability and adaptive skills,” Justice Cochran writes, “most Texas citizens might agree that *Steinbeck’s Lennie* should [...] be exempt” (Court of Criminal Appeals of Texas, emphasis added). Setting aside the fact that Lennie Small is, in fact, *murdered by his only friend*, George Milton, in John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937), one wonders what business Lennie has appearing as a limit case in a legal instrument designed to measure intellectual disability and fitness for capital punishment? No member in good standing of the John Steinbeck Society was called upon to testify during the appeal, as far as I can tell, nor has the State of Texas yet turned to the execution of fictional characters to maintain the hectic pace it seems to prefer for the 21st century dispensation of this “constitutional penalty.”²

² Between 2001 and 2015, Texas executed 292 death row inmates, averaging just fewer than twenty executions per year. At the time of this writing in June 2016, Texas has executed six death row inmates, accounting for almost half of the executions nationwide (Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty).

Disability as a Material-Semiotic Object

Despite its considerable flaws, *Briseño* foregrounds central tensions that preoccupy contemporary critical disability studies (CDS), including the contested negotiations of embodiment in essential and social models of disability, disability's intersection with other minority identities, and the portability of ableist logic across social locations, from literary representations to courts of law and back again. *Disability Ecology: Re-Materializing U.S. Fiction from 1890-1940* takes up these questions in its exploration of the indivisible bonds between nonnormative embodiments, cultural histories of disability in the U.S., and aesthetic forms in narrative art. Toward this end, the chapters that follow examine various semiotic, thematic, and formal networks of actors that produce disability across literary texts and extraliterary experiences.

Disability Ecology theorizes the interpenetrations of the material and the semiotic, particularly as they pertain to the production and durability of disability as it is lived by disabled people and represented in U.S. literary fiction. Just as David Foster Wallace claims to have written *The Broom of the System* (1985) in part because he “got to wondering just what the difference was” between being a “character in a piece of fiction” and a “real person” (qtd. in Max), the ease with which disability is recognized *in* fiction—where the only body is the body of the text—has provoked me to wonder how much the material bodymind matters at all to the dominant understanding of disability as such. That is to say, is *disability* no more than the dominant assumptions about it? Although in his study of intellectual disability and narrative Michael Bérubé “rel[ies] on the ancient—and yet always critical—insight that literary characters are not real people” (*Secret Life* 29), I am interested in examining the nodes of overlap that disability reveals. *Disability Ecology* argues that disability is a material-semiotic object produced

where nonnormative embodiments and discourses meet, meaning that disability is the sum total of the other human and non-human actors, concepts, and sign systems that exist in relational contexts with nonnormative embodiments. I call such a permanently partial network a *disability ecology* and the embodied experience of it a *disability subjectivity*.

A hybrid theory and method of inquiry, *disability ecology* takes seriously David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's call for a "definition of disability [that] must incorporate both the outer and inner reaches of culture and experience as a combination of...social and biological forces" (7). Presuming that "the flesh and blood givenness of the physical body is not a passive surface, but ... in continuous interaction with textual practices" (Shildrick 178), disability ecology exposes the matrix in which a given nonnormatively embodied subject exists embedded in a network of co-constitutive relationships with human and nonhuman actors, such as built infrastructures, technologies, social institutions, and other discursive formations. Disability ecologies differ from the aggregates of influences that shape subjects in general because the social world in which disabled people typically maneuver has been fashioned on ableist principals that inherently marginalize them. This material-semiotic model draws on three definitions of ecology to achieve a flexible granularity that accommodates the movements of individual actors and systems into positions of greater or lesser salience over time and depending on context. First, it references ecology as the study of interactional relationships between organisms and their environments; second, it references ecology as the pattern or aggregate of these relationships, or what is typically called an "ecosystem"; and third, it references ecology as human ecology, a branch of sociology that studies the spatio-temporal interrelationships between human actors and their economic, social, and political organization. Through these simultaneous layers of signification, disability ecology is a framework that can coordinate the otherwise

salient, yet competing models of disability already in circulation, as well as reconcile theories that privilege embodiment with those that privilege social and cultural constructions.

The field of critical disability studies (CDS) is increasingly populated by approaches that engage similar “turn[s] to the body” (qtd. in GW English), and many of these recognize the usefulness of exploring these relationships through literary narrative. Tobin Siebers’s concept of “complex embodiment” comes immediately and productively to mind, as does Mitchell and Snyder’s work on “antinormative novels of embodiment” (*Biopolitics of Disability* 180). In fact, *Disability Ecology* began in 2012 as an attempt to integrate what were then the most salient models of disability and approaches to literary disability studies available—Siebers’s, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s “strategic” uses of essentialism and constructionism, and Mitchell and Snyder’s concept of “disability as multitude”—because they were all clearly *right*, yet their exertions of different pressures on slightly different objects (subjectivities, strategies, collectives) create significant interstices, I felt, in need of elaboration. Despite their productive differences, these concepts all wrestle with the ontological politics of belonging. Each approach in its own way asks what criteria belong to disability as such and who gets to decide; what constitutes embodiment; who belongs to the disabled collective at large; and what, if anything, is useful about this kind of knowing or belonging?³ But disability subjectivities are never just embodiments, nor social constructs, nor “singularities” embedded in non-hierarchical groups: disability subjectivities are always all of these, and more.

To describe the lived experience of people with disabilities, one requires a model that recognizes simultaneity, paradox, complexity, and rupture and that refrains from dividing the material body from its social entanglements. Disability ecology arrives as a new materialist

³ Other theories, such as Lenard J. Davis’s “dismodernism”—which he has since disavowed—cast doubt on the concept of identity itself.

theory of disability that takes seriously the agentic capacities of non-human actors from cultural institutions to technologies to aesthetic objects. In this regard, this study situates itself among emerging critical disability studies work by Alison Kafer, Mitchell and Snyder, and Ellen Samuels, as well as theories drawn from Social Construction of Technology formulations by Bruno Latour, Susan Leigh Starr and Geoff Bowker, and Annemarie Mol. When disability ecology is used to examine the formation of disability subjectivities or the disability as a productive failure to achieve normalcy, the argument draws on the queer and crip/queer theories of Sara Ahmed, Jack Halberstam, and Robert McRuer. Finally, when the study places disability ecologies and subjectivities in conversation with genre and literary aesthetics, the argument turns to Tobin Siebers's work on thematic disability aesthetics while breaking from it to theorize a disability aesthetics beyond representation at the level of narrative form. The argument oscillates between these theoretical moves as often as it shuttles between the lived experience of disabled people and literary disability studies.

Disability and Genre as Acts of Social En(crip)tion

Briseño has become infamous for its discursive promiscuity not for its assumption that intellectual disability exceeds biomedical measurement and classification. As *Briseño* has been invoked to justify the executions of Marvin Wilson, Robert Ladd, and other intellectually disabled offenders, the international reaction to Cochran's use of literary allusion has been overwhelmingly, and unsurprisingly, negative. In the days before Ladd's execution in January 2015, for example, the *Houston Press* ran the headline, "Texas Uses *Of Mice and Men* Standards to Execute Mentally Disabled Man" (Wray); *The Blog*, an op-ed channel of *The Huffington Post*, writes, "Texas Sending Man to Death Chamber on Thursday Based on 'Of Mice and Men'" (Olive); and *The Guardian* quotes Brian Stall, Ladd's attorney from the American Civil Liberties

Union, saying “that his client’s fate should not ‘depend on a novella. Instead of sticking to the standards set by science, [the Texas courts] refer to a character in *Of Mice and Men*”” (Pilkington). Although these headlines sensationalize the role *Of Mice and Men* actually plays in *ex parte Briseño*, these responses extend the strong condemnation of the majority opinion made by John Steinbeck’s son, Thomas. When the Briseño factors were used to justify the execution of Marvin Wilson, a 54-year-old Texas man with intellectual disabilities, in 2012, Thomas Steinbeck offered a public statement that said, ““my father was a highly gifted writer.... His work was certainly not meant to be scientific, and the character of Lennie was never intended to be used to diagnose a medical condition like intellectual disability. I find the whole premise to be insulting, outrageous, ridiculous and profoundly tragic”” (qtd. in Cohen).⁴ Almost all parties— with the notable exception of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals—perceive *Briseño* as traversing a discursive boundary between fiction and fact in need of strict, persistent policing.

Perhaps controversially, I do not disagree with Cochran’s turn to fiction as an index of disability, although I see her methods and the limited interpretive ends they achieve as tragically flawed (to say nothing of the brutal ends to which she puts her interpretive practice). Lennie Small, and literary fiction more broadly, has quite a lot to do with the lived experience of people with nonnormative embodiments, intellectual impairments, and other disabilities. While criticism of Justice Cochran’s generic discontinuity is rooted in the presumption that aesthetic and social forms represent falsity and truth, respectively, the distance between material bodies and representations of them is neither as vast nor as unbridgeable as is typically supposed. If one recognizes bodies as “semiotic objects,” as Terry Eagleton suggests (“Bodies” 564), it becomes easy to recognize disability as part of a “representational system,” which is to say that its strong

⁴ Thomas Steinbeck released his statement to several major media outlets, and quotations from his statement were published by *The Guardian*, *NPR*, *The Huffington Post*, and others. Steinbeck’s official website directs readers to an article in *The Atlantic* by Andy Cohen, “*Of Mice and Men*: The Execution of Marvin Wilson” (August 8, 2012).

sense is structured by various signs and sign systems even as disability itself is often perceived as an originary embodied sign (Garland-Thomson and Holmes 73).

The convoluted diagnostic regime established by *Briseño* appears as the *recto* of a modern medical gaze that has always perceived the body as a system of representations. Long before “semiotics” became associated with Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, the term was used to refer to a practice of medical observation used by some Enlightenment physicians in France to “discern illness or dysfunction in the body” (Vila 29). In “Reading the ‘Sensible’ Body,” Anne C. Vila explains that physicians who practiced medical semiotics would observe a patient’s body over time and catalogue its “excretions and secretions, its color and heat, its respiratory rhythms, and above all its pulses” (31). By collating this data, the “body’s true inner language,” or its range of normative appearances, became a legible mark against which other anomalous, observable marks would then be judged (30). Once the body was made to speak through positivist reduction, physicians could prescribe cures or recommend prophylactic treatments meant to allow nature to resume its unfettered development. While nonnormative embodiments have appeared as metaphors of the extraordinary since antiquity, medical semiotics folded these supposedly auspicious signs into nascent scientific practice by construing the rationalized body as a site of signification, an object with meanings, not a mere biological mechanism.

John Steinbeck himself blurs the boundary between fictional representation and lived experience in various discussions of Lennie Small’s origin. In a letter sent to his agents in the summer of 1936, Steinbeck claims that Lennie does not “represent insanity at all but the inarticulate and powerful yearnings of all men” (Steinbeck xix), a claim that frames intellectual disability as an embodied metaphor for a universal human quality even as it strips away the

material conditions of living as a person with an intellectual disability. Conversely, he admits in an interview with *The New York Times* in 1937 that, “*Lennie was a real person*. He’s in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn’t kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss fired his pal” (“*Mice, Men, and Mr. Steinbeck*,” emphasis added). Steinbeck’s testimony uses a productive but slippery temporality, for the past tense of “was” suggests that Steinbeck perceived the ranch hand on whom Lennie is based *actually as Lennie himself* prior to writing. To state that Lennie is (or was?) a “real person” before the act of writing, the future Nobel laureate suggests that he viewed the murderous bindle-stiff as a real person *and as a symbol* at the same time. This hybrid subject-object, an ontologically ambiguous ranch hand whose material-semiotic experiences of intellectual disability approach the status of a lived textuality, troubles the presumption of inanimacy that attends the common conception of fictional representation. If the symbolic easily overlays lived experience, as Steinbeck suggests, we might question to what extent lived experience could manifest in the symbolic as such. Regarding disability subjectivities, one might wonder to what extent the rhetorical practices that produce disability in a text participate in the production of disability as a material experience. Would it be enough, according to the logic of *Briseño*, simply to ask George Milton or Crooks to what extent they *believed* Lennie to be disabled?

The tragic outcome of *Briseño* is made possible in part because Cochran perceives *Of Mice and Men* as a paradigm of literary realism, a genre commonly believed to imbue works of fiction with truths of universal validity that enables them to perform work in the world. Having earned a B.A. with distinction in English from Stanford University in 1966, Cochran “re-read all of Steinbeck” while living above Cannery Row as a newlywed in the late 1960s (Barton). Steinbeck “always has such good stories about the importance of connecting with people,”

Cochran says, and she describes his characters as “realistic portrayals of human beings that were outside, at least for that time, of the general reading public” (Barton). She reads *Of Mice and Men* as an instance of literary realism, not the allegory that Steinbeck claims, and assumes that as a realist novel, the text contains and doles out particular truths or lessons to readers who simply receive them. In Cochran’s aesthetic frame, textual notations of disability signify overdetermined meanings culled from a range of subjugating disability imaginaries—she describes Lennie as “sort of the gentle giant” (Barton), for example—that generate negative affective responses, not critical perspectives that lead to new knowledge production, social inclusion, or a more egalitarian *polis*. For Cochran, Lennie is a textualization of a type, “the gentle giant,” that seems to *originate in unmediated “nature”* when, in fact, the “gentle giant” is a discursive construct born in narrative and then applied to lived experience. This problematic understanding of genre grants literary realism the capacity to reframe Lennie—who, for many, appears as a static symbol—as a dynamic type that she then misreads to tragic ends.

Given that literature incessantly reproduces disability’s “representational ‘fate’” to “incit[e] the act of meaning-making itself” (Mitchell and Snyder, *Prosthesis* 6), this approach typically results in disability always meaning what dominant culture has already decided it means through the accretion of ableist interpretations. Such “disabling details,” which I explore in later chapters, attempt to stifle the disabled subject’s ability to speak back, repackage, or contest the dominant meanings of particular signs. As Eagleton suggests, however, novels “mobilize such facts as part of a moral pattern” (*After Theory* 90). Instead of finding nuggets of unmediated data about essentialized identities, readers can examine the networks of semantic, syntactic, and semiotic features of texts that produce disability—what I call *disability ecologies*—and grant it meaning through aesthetic acts of *social encryption*. Disability always

contests its own social encryption through medical, legal, and aesthetic discourses, always speaking back in material-semiotic ways that include having the audacity to exist at all. Cochran would do well to remember, as would we, that “novels do not exist to tell us that the loris is a slow-moving nocturnal primate” or other such facts of empirical validity (Eagleton, *After Theory* 90).

Crippling Literary Disability Studies: The Death of the Distant Reader

If disability is a material-semiotic practice, it follows that representations of disability in literary fiction can produce knowledge about disability subjectivities. Because there is no Archimedean point from which to perceive one’s own disability ecology, one can turn to the limited sets of signifiers in literary texts as sources of knowledge production, self-reflection, and systemic critique of the orientating relationships that structure disabled people’s lives. In *Reassembling the Social* (2005), Bruno Latour grants “the resource of fiction” the capacity to “bring...the solid objects of today into the fluid states where their connections with humans may make sense” (*Reassembling* 82). Here Latour echoes Herbert Marcuse, who claims that an aesthetic form, which is “the result of the transformation of a given content...into a self-contained whole,” can be “recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality” because it is “‘taken out’ of the constant process” of daily life (Marcuse 8, 6). Granting form to fluid experience, Marcuse argues, allows relationships between actors to become visible when they would otherwise be plowed under by the unrelenting movement of experience’s furrow. Even if a majority of texts do reiterate marginalizing assumptions,⁵ literary criticism can engage a disability ecology not only to offer interpretations and to map systems of signification

⁵ In these all too frequent cases, the texts effect a negative production in that they reveal the systemic oppression of disabled people.

but also to create knowledge about how fiction produces disability in a text through non-representational semantic systems and formal elements.

At a historical moment enamored with distant reading, the close reading of individual texts remains important because the ecological networks of semiotic, syntactic, and semantic features that produce particular disability representations reveal a radical nonconformity and can arrest and interrogate the ephemeral disability ecologies of everyday life.⁶ Consistent with the “blissed-out technobunny fantasy” of posthuman subjectivity formations (Gane and Haraway 139), distant reading is actually powered by a dream, perhaps the literary critic’s greatest: one might finally “read” everything.⁷ These practices produce new knowledge about literature at the level of the corpus—with Franco Moretti’s quantitative formalism a particularly exciting project—yet many of the questions that arise when disability and narrative intersect remain unanswered, I believe, because we have not learned how to look carefully enough at what already lies before us.⁸ Like stargazers who focus on a single star in the firmament, critics of literary disability run the risk of dimming their own perceptions by looking closely at only one aspect of a text—or running an algorithm that does the looking for them. Those critics who look askance at the star often see it most brightly.

By narrowing the analytical aperture so drastically, dominant methods used in the literary interpretation of disability create systemic limitations that disability ecology attempts to address. Literary disability studies seems to be divided between two methodologies: a well-established one that focuses on thematic treatments of disability representations in particular texts and another emergent one that investigates correspondences between narrative forms and ideas about

⁶ See chapter 1, “Disability, Subjects, Ecology,” for a discussion “concerning the relationship between textual and lived ecologies.

⁷ Paradoxically, such sentiment suggests that literary criticism has heretofore been disabled by the claims of the nagging flesh, even as disability theorists have shown that disability has remained curiously under theorized.

⁸ Moretti himself acknowledges that distant reading was first announced partly “as a joke” (Moretti 44).

particular disabilities. *Thematic readings* tend to address the social construction of disability by linking representations to extraliterary assumptions about disabled people, while *differential readings*—my name for readings that link ideas about disability in the text to disability symptomologies—return awareness to embodiment, often with a vengeance. In her early literary disability studies work, for example, Garland-Thomson criticizes the thematic deployment of Captain Ahab’s amputated leg in *Moby-Dick* (1851) as an index of his monomania, yet her analysis elides the narrative attention paid to Ahab’s prosthetic relationship with technology (not to mention the presence of another amputee, Captain Boomer, whose loss of an arm to *Moby-Dick* does not foster a similar retributive obsession). Ahab’s use of a prosthetic and his ability to adapt “himself and the maritime world around him to better accommodate his disability” (Mitchell and Snyder, *Prosthesis* 121) works against the typically totalizing impulse of thematic analysis. When Ishmael describes Ahab’s first ascent above deck—“Upon each side of the Pequod's quarter deck...*there was an auger hole, bored about half an inch or so, into the plank. His bone leg steadied in that hole; one arm elevated, and holding by a shroud; Captain Ahab stood erect, looking straight out beyond the ship’s ever-pitching prow*” (Melville 109, emphasis added)—we bear witness to a profound defamiliarization of human-technology relationships if not to one of the first cyborgs in American literature. By neglecting the symptomatic readings of even the most odious representations of disability,⁹ such as how Ahab retains his authority and his livelihood because he modifies the Pequod to accommodate his nonnormative body, literary

⁹ My use of symptomatic reading differs from the definition posed by John Thurston, for whom symptomatic reading means “analyzing the presence of ideology in literary texts” (638). I draw my usage from H. Porter Abbot, who more broadly defines symptomatic reading as a mode of reading that expresses “the conditions out of which [the narrative] comes” (105); for Abbot, symptomatic reading runs counter to intentional reading.

criticism misses an important opportunity to rewrite the dominant, marginalizing definition of disability.¹⁰

At the forefront of the differential reading camp, Michael Bérubé claims that *narrative can itself be disabled* when its forms exhibit symptoms of particular disabilities. While Georg Lukács sees the symptoms of a degenerate culture in the experimental forms of the modern novel, Bérubé views disabled narrative as a positive aesthetic development for literary art, one that bypasses tropes of representation in favor of “*ideas about disability*” that “*need not involve any character with disabilities at all*” (*Secret Life* 19, original emphasis). He argues, for example, that William Faulkner’s choice to focalize the first section of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) through Benjy produces formal characteristics associated with some form of mental disability, a symptomology that expands the spatio-temporal possibilities of narration (“Narrative and Intellectual Disability” 470–471). Bérubé provocatively argues that Faulkner’s *narrative itself* is disabled because it represents the lived experience of neurological difference. This artistic benefit is also a political deficit, however: he sets this aesthetic practice’s roots in the presumptive, totalizing authority of medical diagnosis and leaves out the possibility that narrative forms deploy structures of feeling or affective responses of disability as narrative forms. While thematic analysis links textual representations to dominant cultural assumptions about disability and differential readings turn to medical discourse to link narrative functions to symptoms, neither project pays enough attention to the interplay of signifiers, cardinal functions,

¹⁰ Mitchell and Snyder contrast Ahab’s “resourcefulness in making an accessible ship” with his “deterministic fate” (*Prosthesis* 12)—in this way, they argue, Ahab illustrates the capacity of literary disability to perform a positive function in art but to perform a negative function in politics by affirming the meaningfulness of physical or mental differences. They cite this and other textual details that describe the interface between Ahab and the Pequod in order to claim that Ahab reinforces marginalizing assumptions about disability despite being situated in a text that routinely questions the stability of meaning. Instead of trying to define how Melville may have intended Ahab to function, a symptomatic reading that acknowledges Melville’s stake in allegorizing “bourgeois individualism’s historical conflict with liberal democracy” (Markels 1) might frame some of the same details as evidence of agency, others as products of narrative focalization, and so on.

catalyzers, and other elements of narrative discourse as a network of producers of disability in its own right. Useful for illuminating discrete sets of functions or formal elements, each type of analysis assumes a narrowness that cannot address the fullness of literary disability that, like its lived counterpart, issues from a complex ecology.

To broaden this approach, *Disability Ecology* risks an unfashionable return to the analysis of individual literary texts that are strongly identified with specific genres and situated in a national literary tradition. It does so in full awareness of its own historical moment in which distant reading is celebrated, questions of genre are often answered with either polite bemusement or outright disbelief in its agential capacities, and the idea of national literatures is met with skepticism at best. As poststructuralism poured out its bowls of deconstruction, reader response, and critical race and feminist theories on the New Criticism (even as its primary method, close reading, was salvaged), the theoretical turn in the late 20th century cracked open the possibilities of unbound textuality and forced a reconsideration of classificatory criteria and the utility of classification itself. The re-adoption of these frameworks is not meant as an earth-salting corrective to the systems building of contemporary literary disability studies, an assertion that genre exists somehow outside of human activity, or as a critique of border-breaking theories that demonstrate the irrelevance of national identities to the global flows of capital. Instead, *Disability Ecology* takes these critical positions as the very conditions of its own possibility. In the 21st century, a critic can meaningfully engage a literary text only after appreciating its embeddedness in various socio-economic systems—including those of gender, race, sexuality, and ability; of genre; and of literary history. This study returns to specific texts to identify disability ecologies that illustrate the networks of literary and social forms that each text mobilizes to produce disability. By attending to particular literary disability ecologies, this

project aims to illustrate a method and to inaugurate an archive that can be used to think through the lived experience of disability ecologies.

The literary analyses in *Disability Ecology* often confront the intersection of disability and genre, revealing the transportability of forms across social context. Any analysis of disability representations in generic fiction must contend with the notable porosity of borders between genres not least because there is a “general lack of consensus about what constitutes a genre” as such (Howard, “Sand” 93). In this study, *genre* refers to a kind of aesthetic form that typically collates themes, styles, and other textual details in the service of particular expressive or ideological purposes but also can produce contradictory or ambiguous effects. Further, this argument takes for granted the occurrence of “generic discontinuities,” Fredric Jameson’s term for the ubiquitous traversals of generic conventions between seemingly discrete genres (*The Political Unconscious* 185). Whether or not we can agree on a comprehensive definition of genre, we must acknowledge that readers often bring generic assumptions to acts of reading, and genre’s mediating capacity is often crucial to textual encounters with disability. Generic assumptions often establish expectations for how texts, and particular textual elements, will behave. In this way, readers’ understandings of particular genres—consider realism and naturalism, for example—prestructure the reception and interpretation of disabled characters and disability motifs, as in the case of Justice Cochran and Lennie Smalls from *Of Mice and Men*. Mitchell and Snyder refer to this as a “‘closing down’ of an otherwise permeable and dynamic narrative form” that leads to “the reification of disabled people as fathomless mysteries who simultaneously provoke and elude cultural capture” (*Prosthesis* 50, 61). That is to say, normative readers bring to bear dominant, subjugating, nonliterary assumptions about disability on textual representations of nonnormative embodiment.

While poststructuralists may reject the claim that disability might close down the cascading chain of signification, nonliterary experiences of nonnormative embodiment often support it. Ato Quayson adds to this critique by rejecting any interpretive framework that includes nonliterary experience “extrinsic to the literary field itself” (25) as though the literary and the nonliterary were separated by an impermeable membrane, not each thoroughly suffused with the other. In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Caroline Levine rejects the perceived division between social forms and the aesthetic forms that supposedly represent them, instead arguing that “literary forms and social formations are equally real in their capacity to organize materials, and equally unreal in being artificial, contingent constraints” (14). “Since social forms can move across contexts,” Levine argues, narrative forms are particularly useful for staging the collision of forms that “reveal [those forms’] potentialities in fiction as well as nonfiction” (19). While Levine argues that the lived experience of sexism and sexist representations both hail from the same social forms of inequality, by extension the social forms of signification that produce representations of disability also produce disability as such. Discursive subjugation occurs most often, I suggest, when disability is either “attached to other representations of otherness to grant them supplementary meaning, sharper focus, and additional weight” (Siebers, *Disability Theory* 48) or figured as static and fixed, something that is always already known, instead of always emerging. In *The Secret Life of Stories* (2016), Michael Bérubé writes that such deployments lead to “the realization that *character X has Y disability* [as an explanatory mechanism] in place of the more productive realization that *character X does Y because of Z*” (*Secret Life* 21, original emphasis). The first formula takes disability as a mode of determinism, while the second opens for disabled subjects a full range of motivations and causes for action or its refusal.

Although disability in representational art has “always symbolize[d] something other than itself,” Tobin Siebers argues that such subordination need not continue (*Disability Theory* 48). If *some* representations are subjugating and *others* are not, it becomes essential to discover how certain textual details produce a particular kind or kinds of subjugation and how other textual details produce liberatory, or even neutral, effects. Disability activists should embrace symbolic representations of disability, Siebers claims, for symbolism “describes the dynamic by which individuals are recognized by others and gather into communities” and, therefore, enables the political as such (*Disability Theory* 48). Siebers, therefore, calls for disability activists to “recapture” disability’s own symbolism as a means to “reintroduce the reality of disability identity into the public imagination” (*Disability Theory* 48). For this reintroduction to bear political fruit, Siebers argues that narratives must be told that emphasize how disabled reality and nondisabled reality is a shared, common reality.

One strength of disability life writing is its ability to represent disability as “dynamic, relational, and emergent” (Kerschbaum 57), yet literary fiction can also offer disability-inflected characterizations, themes, and forms that likewise capture disability’s productive mutability. Arguing for the usefulness of fiction as a mode of social critique, Herbert Marcuse claims that an aesthetic form, which is “the result of the transformation of a given content...into a self-contained whole,” can be “recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given [nonliterary] reality” (8). Instead of representation infringing upon the agential status of the subject, Marcuse argues that representation can free subjects by re-presenting subjectivities as momentarily stable objects that an audience can engage. For Marcuse, the institutions of daily life already produce a reductive subjugation that aesthetic representation, because it is “‘taken out’ of the constant process” of daily life (6), can restore. Stephen Crane’s novella *The Monster*

(1898), for example, represents the disablement of Henry Johnson as a restless assemblage of social relationships, public and private spaces, and racist ideological practices that continuously reinscribe disability's meaning and reorientate Johnson's social location. At the same time, Johnston's bare life calls into question systems of law, racist socio-economics, and medical ethics and reveals their rootedness in the ideology of ability. In the chapters that follow, I describe specific uses of major genres at particular historical moments in late 19th and early 20th century American literary history—while acknowledging that genre formations continuously interpenetrate one another both synchronically and diachronically—and relate how the quest for mimetic accuracy associated with realism or the rupture of narrative form in modernism, for example, deploys disability as a thematic trope or formal conceit that intersects with, structures, reproduces, and occasionally challenges dominant assumptions about disability.

Organization of the Study

The literary archive in *Disability Ecology* includes novels and short stories from the American realist period in the late 19th century, a literary period commonly associated with an aesthetic practice committed to the accurate representation of quotidian experience, to the Modernist period after World War I. Because generic conventions are typically raced, gendered, and classed, my analysis accounts for the textual functions produced when disability is superadded to racialized or gendered markers of socio-political disqualification. While authors from Edith Wharton to Saul Bellow retain disability as a trope of incapacity, my research shows that the value of this supposed lack grows to include what we might recognize as a productive “crip art of failure” (Mitchell and Snyder, *Biopolitics of Disability* 22) as it reappears in naturalist, modernist, and postmodern texts as an organizational schema. The narrative rupture in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper”; the institutionalization of the composite

novel by authors like Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, and Jean Toomer; and the decentralization of both plot and subject in Jack Kerouac's experimental fiction, for instance, demonstrate the increased viability of disability subjectivities as *formal models*, not *thematic topoi*, for texts that foreground interdependence without sacrificing wholeness. Formal devices that foreground the constructedness of a given text—like non-linearity, pastiche, and metafictional commentary—demonstrate affinities with disability viewed as an embodied critique of built environments, institutions, and ableist-ideological practices.

The first three chapters in the dissertation establish disability ecology as a model and set in motion a dialectic of disability themes and disability forms. The first chapter, "Disability, Subjects, Ecology," claims that disability appears in social interactions and literary narrative not as an *object* but as a *material-semiotic practice*. Through a reading of Richard Powers's novel *Gain* (1999), I situate disability ecology as a new materialist model for conceptualizing disability subjectivities, and I establish affinities between this theory and contemporary critical disability studies work by Alison Kafer, and David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, and Tobin Siebers. In *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) Kafer recasts disability as a political/relational model produced by the interaction of animated objects, such as "built environments and social patterns" (6), while in *Disability Theory* (2008) Siebers offers a theory of "complex embodiment" that reinserts the material body into models of disability. To extend these powerful interventions, disability ecology calls upon Actor-Network Theory (ANT), a theory and practice that recognizes the agency of nonhuman actors as it maps and describes the relationships between things (material) and concepts (semiotics) in transient, heterogeneous networks. Disability ecology serves as the primary tool that allows me in the following chapters to interrogate a range of institutions that

help structure disability subjectivities and to describe narratological problems specific to their representational and formal deployments.

Chapters two and three introduce two textual features revealed by the ecological approach. The second chapter, “The Spectacular Banality of Literary Disability,” theorizes the methods by which disability is made to appear in literary texts. Drawing upon Stephanie Kerschbaum’s concept of “markers of difference” (72), this chapter elaborates *disabling details*, meaning those signifiers that render a character as having an impairment and that produce *disability effects* through acts of interpretation. In a reading of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), I argue that disability details appear as if they were pieces of the Real, creating a sense that literary representations self-reference their own extraliterary material truth. Because genre, as an aesthetic and ideological apparatus, possesses the agential power to animate some textual objects more than others, I theorize the ambiguous, pluripotent functions of disabling details in comparative readings of texts typically understood as exemplary of American literary realism, including William Dean Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) and Charles Chesnut’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901).

The third chapter, “Biopolitical Aesthetics and the Crip Gesture of Naturalism,” examines the reinscription of disability thematics under an aesthetic regime that often turns to contemporary natural philosophy to justify the depiction of the human animal as structured by innate drives, as always at risk of disability, and as prone to atavistic regression. Disability haunts these texts as a potential state for all people, not just those whose congenital physical or neurological differences mark them as impaired, but its manifestation always announces a failed state of being that requires cure or justifies elimination. Edith Wharton’s *Sanctuary* (1903) and Frank Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute* (1914, written 1894-5), for example, link aesthetic taste,

often understood as a correlation of exceptional physiology and normative training, to genetic fitness and the absence of taste to disability. To possess refined taste is at the same time to announce one's superior physical and neurological development, while to lack taste or aesthetic sensibility is to foreshadow one's own genetic regression and impending disablement.

Ultimately, the articulation of disability with bad taste provides an opportunity to reflect on the role of aesthetics in the disqualification of some people from full socio-economic participation.

The fourth chapter, "Disability Kitsch, Literary Inclusionism, and the Crip Art of Aesthetic Failure," considers the aesthetic uses of disability as a trope of characterization and as a thematic element in Modernist texts that approach mimesis through representation and form. This chapter argues that disabled characters, when defined solely through disabling details that are figured as static and self-evident, appear as kitsch objects that often seem to produce aesthetic experience but in fact reproduce normative assumptions about disability as a fixed, knowable, and known identity. Willa Cather's "The Profile" (1907) demonstrates how thematic uses of disability in so-called high art exhibit uncanny similarities, fulfill stock narrative functions, and evoke a closed set of pathetic responses without actually depicting the lived experience of disability. To examine this crip art of failed aesthetics, I turn to Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1927), a narrative that largely avoids disability kitsch while offering an example of a disability aesthetics that depends on literary form, not representation. Unlike Cather's short story, Hemingway's treatment of disability pays particular attention to Harry Morgan's negotiation of impairment and the impact of disability on his sense of self, while the form of the novel—written in three sections that incorporate at least four distinct points-of-view—makes a strong argument for the expressive capacity of disability subjectivities as distributed ecological systems without depending on representation.

Altogether, these chapters demonstrate the uses of disability ecology as an analytic model for investigating disability subjectivities and as an interpretive framework for reading American fiction. In each case, disability appears as the product of a material-semiotic assemblage of actors that manifests as readily in representational art as it does in social interactions. As a theoretical model, disability ecology intervenes in the dialectic that preoccupies contemporary critical disability theories of subjectivity by aligning issues of embodiment (which are always already social) with issues of social practice (which always already occur in material spaces between material objects). Instead of attempting to develop a totalizing model that grants ultimate authority to either the body or cultural practices, disability ecology affirms that disability itself is produced interactionally when particular bodies encounter other bodies, human or non-human, that orientate them towards or away from certain objects, possibilities of becoming, and futures. Although these ecologies are difficult to perceive during daily life because they are always emergent, literary representations can arrest particular sets of reciprocal relationships, thus making them available to analysis and critique. Such analyses reveal the constitutive force disability exerts across a range of discourses such as formations of identity based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality; economic practices and forms of labor; and, not least, narrative.

CHAPTER ONE

Disability, Subjects, Ecology

That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I
knew I should be of my body.

Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

We are functioning in a world that is fundamentally
characterised by objects in motion. These objects include ideas
and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages,
technologies and techniques.

Arjun Appadurai, "Globalization and the Research
Imagination"

A Story of "When We Lived Wrong"

Laura Bodey was a successful real estate agent, the newest member of the Million Dollar Movers Club for Next Millennium Realty in Lacewood, Illinois, before she developed ovarian cancer and died, leaving behind a teenaged daughter, Ellen, and a twelve year-old son, Tim. While the causes of ovarian cancer remain indeterminate, Laura belonged to an uncharacteristic "cluster" of women with ovarian cancer in Lacewood. Weeks before her death in Mercy Foundation Hospital, Laura learned that she had been awarded a sizable settlement as part of a class-action lawsuit against Clare International, a multinational corporation whose Agricultural Products Division, located in Lacewood, had been releasing significant yet legal amounts of

carcinogenic byproducts into the air and water. Furthermore, she learned that several of the company's consumer products, including a common herbicide that she used on her flower garden, were also objects of study for possible links to cancer. Don Bodey, Laura's ex-husband, saw the settlement both as Clare's acknowledgment of liability and an implicit admission of responsibility for her illness and impairment. Laura viewed the settlement in more pragmatic terms: due to the scandal surrounding the EPA findings, Clare common stock had dropped precipitously, and the settlement simply presented the most cost-effective maneuver to protect the financial positions of the corporation and its shareholders.

When Laura received her diagnosis, she entered a neoliberal medical complex that expects care receivers to be their own best advocates, to manage their treatment, and to make recovery their business. These increased responsibilities for care receivers dovetailed, she learned, with the increased corporatization of health care in the United States. She noted that "all the magazines agree: health care is the patient's business." Prior to her diagnosis, the authoritative rhetoric of clinical discourse and medical marketing lead her to believe that any illness was a "holdover from when we lived wrong." Because she had always treated her own health as an "abstraction," the persuasive rhetoric of the neoliberal medical industry conditioned her to believe that cancer was her fault and that her diagnosis was a sign of a personal failure and having somehow "lived wrong" despite an abundance of troubling evidence that suggested toxic pollution and environmental injustice. Believing that she had failed in her own health management, Laura experienced tremendous guilt despite assurances from Dr. Jenkins, her surgeon, about the ambiguous causes of ovarian cancer, and she worried that there was something she might have done to avoid cancer or (worse) to have caused it.

Don Bodey did not blame Laura for the cancer—he blamed Clare International and felt partially vindicated by the settlement—but he did criticize her for not approaching her hospitalization and treatment like a business negotiation. Don’s acceptance of the neoliberal logic of modern healthcare may have been practical, but it naturalized the translation of a personal right into a consumable good, a shift that disproportionately marginalizes the most vulnerable members of the community. While Don’s logic omitted those without financial or other resources to act as capable self-advocates, Laura romanticized their marginalized social position. Looking from her hospital window at the “rotting neighborhoods” bisected by the train line that carried raw materials into and industrial byproducts out of the Clare facility, she “imagine[d] herself in another life, indigent, penniless, victimized. But well.” Despite her lack of awareness of the disproportionate occurrence of illness and disability in lower income communities, Laura’s unwillingness to act as a health care consumer demonstrated an advanced understanding of the contemporary medical industry. She knew that the modern hospital is a business driven by profit just like Clare, but “not the kind that cares what its customers think.”

Alienated from her own health by refusing the role of empowered consumer, Laura sought alternative modes of engaging the emotional and physical aspects of living with cancer. From her initial post-operative consultation with Dr. Jenkins, Laura was introduced to narrative as a source of knowledge and as a technology of recovery. She was left unenlightened by hospital pamphlets like *Diet and Cancer* and *Chemotherapy and You* as well as self-help books such as *Cheer: Your First Line of Defense*, so she turned to other narratives in an attempt to make sense of her changed self. When her cyst removal resulted in a complete hysterectomy, she identified with the protagonists in “amputation stories” who discover in post-op recovery that the surgeon removed the wrong limb, and as she healed she puzzled over not having witnessed the

portentous signs of impending illness that she associated with “midnight reruns.” She developed an awareness of the ableist logic of Hollywood films that focus on sick or disabled characters when she failed to identify with the young, non-disabled actors who consistently beat medical odds that she herself could not. When she realized that no popular stories spoke to her experiences of disabled embodiment, narrative became a form of oppression.

Also oppressive: the expectations of friends and colleagues that she narrate her diagnosis and treatment. She quickly learned to resent the expectation that she should craft a coherent narrative from an arbitrary event, one that mattered least to her as an aesthetic experience. Just as Laura herself had searched for a causal link in her discussion with her oncologist, Laura’s friends relied on her to provide such a link for them. As cancer completed its rearrangement of her subjectivity, she believed that narrative emanated from her body itself, causing cashiers and grocery baggers to react differently toward her. Finally, she realized that the insight disability had provided to see her life anew also brought with it a new perspective for interpreting stories, both the textual ones we read and the social ones we live. Helping Tim, her son, with his homework, an explication of Walt Whitman’s lyric-narrative poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” she realized that she could draw on her own life as a resource for interpretation. Considering the speaker’s projected speech first fifty and then one hundred years into the future, Laura concluded that Whitman could not have been ill when he wrote, “It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not.” Nor could Tim’s teacher have ever been seriously sick and still assigned the poem. For Laura, time availed quite a bit.

* * *

As recipients of Laura’s story, readers of Richard Powers’s novel *Gain* (1998) may feel uncomfortable as they realize their own demand for disability narrative. As a newly disabled

woman, Laura Bodey is the principal instrument for the novel's critique of the deleterious effects of environmental injustice produced by global capitalism at the end of the twentieth century. At the same time, however, Laura fulfills the social expectation that a disabled person "must narrate one's disability for others" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Prosthesis* xii). She often satisfies other characters' typical expectations for narrative, even when she denies them, for her resistance is narrated to a reading audience hungry for stories about difference. This second mode denies the novel its opportunity to lodge a "*thoroughgoing challenge to the undergirding authorization to interpret that disability invites*" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Prosthesis* 59, original emphasis).

Disability in Western culture is perceived as the result of a narratable event, according to Mitchell and Snyder, and as such to presuppose its own inevitable narration. Each audience's desire for a causal disability narrative derives in part from a need to manage or contain the ungovernability that nonnormative embodiments suggest without providing unsettling details that give the lie to the storytelling act itself. After Don Bodey perfunctorily asks Laura how she feels after her first session of chemotherapy, for example, she notes that he looks away as if to foreclose her divulgence of difficult or painful details (Powers 129). Laura's developing resistance to personal narrative speaks to issues of privacy, the inadequacy of representation to mark her new positionality as a disabled subject, and an acceptance of disability as an exception to causal logic.

By introducing readers to a critique of disability narrative, *Gain* creates an occasion for its readers to begin to think differently about disability and their relationship to it. For this and other reasons that I will soon explain, *Gain* serves as an exemplary introduction to the key concepts and ideas that recur throughout this study. This chapter will focus first on redefining *disability* as a material-semiotic practice that underpins the concepts of *disability ecology* and the

disability subjectivities that such ecologies entail.¹¹ Stephanie Kerschbaum succinctly summarizes this set of interrelationships by claiming that disability is always “dynamic, relational, and emergent” (Kerschbaum 57), a phrase I take as meaning that disability is itself an ongoing elaboration forever being shaped through embodied social practice. The interdependent networks of social actors and relationships that structure disability and concomitant subjectivities, including those that produce subjugation and those that enable liberation or freedom, appear as *disability ecologies*. *Gain* illustrates this concept by articulating Laura’s cancer to an ecological network of causal actors that runs from industrial byproducts to the decision making of Clare executives to the body’s own imperatives to ableist employers. The articulation of Laura’s disability ecology disrupts the strong definition of disability, replacing the dominant essentialist perspective of it as an individuating and embodied pathology in need of rehabilitation or cure with a material-semiotic one that acknowledges disability as an embodied source of knowledge-production and creativity.

As the novel narrates Laura’s continued immersion into the “life of hidden negotiations” (Mitchell and Snyder, *Prosthesis* x) that structure disabled peoples’ lives in ableist social locations, it also offers an attentive description of her developing *disability subjectivity*. Even if we grant that all subjects are “sedimentation[s] of established habits” (Braidotti 212), the contingencies that structure disability subjectivities differ in part because the shared social field—from built environments to the rights-granting institutions of biopolitical certification to aesthetics—orientates normative subjects and dislocates nonnormative ones. Although disability ecologies *structure disability subjectivities*, they do not *determine* them, nor does the dominant ableist orientation of the public sphere consign disability to a subordinate position as normalcy’s

¹¹ In general discussions about disability as experiential embodiment, I write of disability ecologies in the plural to acknowledge the profound experiential differences in embodiment among disabled people. When I engage a specific set of actors that structure either an individual life or a particular characterization, however, I use the singular form.

unwanted detritus. Instead, this study views disability as a *technique* for living differently through nonnormative embodiment. Michel Foucault defines “techniques of the self” as “reflective and voluntary practices by which men [sic] not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make of their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (*The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* 10–1, original emphasis). Living embedded in a disability ecology demands such techniques in that the marginalization of the disabled person creates a standpoint from which the naturalized, and therefore invisible, rules of ableist normalcy become apparent, forcing the disabled person to choose whether to attempt their performance and to what degree. Alternatively, the rejection of those dominant conventions leads the disabled person to create new idiosyncratic rules for living—or perhaps a willed absence of rules—that manifest as an embodied aesthetics or personal crip style. In this way disability ecology answers Alison Kafer’s call to “begin thinking disability, and disability futures, otherwise” (7).

The textual representation of a disability ecology and the rhetorical deployment of disability subjectivity as an act of critique further mark *Gain* as an object of *disability aesthetics*. Tobin Siebers describes disability aesthetics as a sense of “beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet it is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result” (*Aesthetics* 3). Although disability has long been narrative’s “prosthetic,” an alien and defamiliarizing supplement often used as an “explicitly complicating feature” in literary art (Mitchell and Snyder, *Prosthesis* 3), American authors throughout a long 20th century inaugurate and sustain a tradition of using disability as a trope of representation that signals an opening of a commons perceived as under siege by rapacious corporatization. *Gain* similarly marshals a range of

disability thematics that frame disease and disability as a possible shared future meant to enroll readers in a humanistic resistance to the creep of neoliberal capital. The novel manifests a disability aesthetics that exceeds representation, however, by incorporating disability sensibilities in its unconventional narrative form. In this way, *Gain* opens an avenue for the theorization of a disability aesthetics divorced from representation, one that depends on the mobilization of “*ideas about disability*” instead of characterization (Bérubé, *Secret Life* 19, original emphasis). While Michael Bérubé links such a move to motive and plot, what is often referred to as *fabula* in narratology, I read *Gain* as an extension of this concept to literary form, or *sujet*, meaning how the story is organized.

The concepts of disability ecology, disability subjectivities, and a non-representational disability aesthetics are foundational to the project as a whole, and each subsequent chapter calls upon them to do interpretive work, modifies them based upon historical contexts, and critiques them when disabled people and characters offer productive resistance. As I explore these concepts in this chapter, the argument performs (often concurrently) a range of theoretical moves meant to guide readers, including those who may unknowingly subscribe to the individuating medical model of disability, to an appreciation of the structuring roles played by a range of non-human actors in the lives of disabled people. This argument is rooted in contemporary critical disability theory, yet to describe how these heterogeneous networks produce disability and structure disability subjectivities, I explore the agential capacities of inanimate objects such as pesticides and prosthetics by using new materialist approaches and Science, Technology and Society (STS) methods; to reveal and explicate the creation of disability subjectivities, I adopt and adapt Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenological methods to emphasize actors and objects that are typically overlooked by an ableist gaze, including built environments, aesthetic objects that

orientate disabled people's lives, and textual notations that attach meaning to nonnormative embodiments; and to theorize how disability is used to shape aesthetic experience, I coordinate Siebers's and Bérubé's work on disability aesthetics and narratology, respectively, with Roland Barthes's and Fredric Jameson's theories of genre to investigate the semantic and semiotic systems that produce literary disability. These theories and methods enrich critical disability studies while disability exerts a counter pressure that opens these interdisciplinary discourses to unexpected critique.

The Matter of Disability and Other Disability Matters

Disability is a material-semiotic effect produced by the social relationships between embodied individuals and a range of non-human actors including cultural practices, institutions, and technologies. Disability is also relational, recursively inflecting those bodies, actors, and networks with new meanings that disability itself makes available. By connecting the material conditions of nonnormative embodiment with the cultural meanings attached to them in one model, disability ecology offers a new materialist solution to the essentialism-constructionism debate that has long attended disability studies. Dominant essentialist discourse, commonly called the medical model of disability, situates disability as a pathology that manifests in a body and requires biomedical intervention to restore or approximate normative functions or aesthetic qualities. Disability studies theorists and disability rights activists have countered this model by positing disability as a social construction, meaning that disability is a condition imposed upon a body by inhospitable social and built environments that are themselves formed by ableist ideology. The social model often hinges on the separation of *impairment* (meaning a nonnormative characteristic of embodiment) from *disability* (meaning a state of subjugation created by inaccessible features of built and social environment). This separation risks a denial of

how the body is constructed through discourse and how the social field only exists as such through embodied experience. Put another way, essentialism disproportionately foregrounds immanence by thwarting any reading of the social ascription of disability identification and social construction disembodies disabled subjectivities by eliding the material conditions of a given person's lived experience.

As a concept, disability ecology reintroduces the nonnormative bodymind into discussions about disability, disabled people, and the aesthetic implications of disability in narrative art. In this way, the study joins contemporary critical disability theorists like Tobin Siebers and Alison Kafer whose works seek to unite the body and the social by offering new materialist ways of thinking about disability. Tobin Siebers's concept of "complex embodiment" (*Disability Theory* 22), for example, reconciles the dichotomy between corporeality and discourse represented by foundational arguments for "strategic essentialism" advanced in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1996) and the discontinuation of disabled identity in Lennard J. Davis' "The End of Identity Politics and the Beginning of Dismodernism" (2002). Complex embodiment holds that "knowledge is situated, that it adheres in social locations, [and] that it is embodied" (*Disability Theory* 25). A theoretical framework in which identity is always both a representational and material site of knowledge production, Siebers's model offers an "economy between social representations and the body not as unidirectional as in the social model, or nonexistent as in the medical model, but as reciprocal" (*Disability Theory* 25). While previous essentialist and social models imply that disabled subjects are primarily *acted upon* by either internal or external forces, complex embodiment fruitfully replaces the embodied subject within ongoing, corresponsive relationships with its "environmental, representational, [and] corporeal" contexts in order to offer a concept of disability and disability

subjectivities that affirms a self that is no less “whole” for being decentered, permanently partial, interdependent, and dynamic (*Disability Theory* 27, 25). A “theory that describes reality as a mediation, no less real for being such, between representation and its social objects,” complex embodiment offers the possibility that subjects can transform the social representation of their body or realign their social location through agential, embodied practice that achieves political ends (*Disability Theory* 30, 26).

While Siebers begins to map a new materialist terrain, Alison Kafer populates it with a range of intersectional bodies—texts, subjects, and social locations—that add granular specificity to Siebers’s broad outlines. In *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), Kafer proposes a “political/relational model” of disability that situates disability “in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being” (6). The political/relational model breaks from the dominant social model of disability by “pluraliz[ing] the ways we understand bodily instability” (7), particularly through a renewed attention to nonnormative embodiment. While the disabled community shares a general mistrust of a medical-industrial complex that has long essentialized and individuated disability, thereby turning disabled people into consumers of curative procedures and products (and often into the raw materials of medical research itself), Kafer’s model acknowledges the value many disabled people find in medical intervention even as it exposes the influence that ableist ideology exerts on most medical practices. By risking the re-medicalization of disability, Kafer takes seriously the opportunity to foreground disability’s capacity to promote creative interdependence.

Moves like these that break apart the concepts of boundedness and autonomy are vital for rendering disability legible as a material-semiotic phenomenon. Instead of affirming a Cartesian formulation of matter as inert, theories of new materialisms hold in common that “materiality is

always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (Coole and Frost 9).

Disability ecology locates this “something more” in the co-constituting relationships between human subjects and the material actors, human and non-human, that produce the effects that generate disablement and structure disability and its subjectivities. Such a view counters the essentializing assumption that disability is located in material non-normative physical or neurochemical characteristics that determine disabled subjects, and it instigates disability’s productive movement away from inert matter or disembodied sociality and toward a material-semiotic disability that structures subjectivities defined by creative interdependencies.

For this reason, I propose a theory of disability and its concomitant subjectivities that focuses on networks from the self-reflexive perspectives of embodied, disabled subjects. This ecological approach frames disability as the networked product of interdependent relationships focalized through human subjects but extended to non-human actors like social institutions, state policies that grant or rescind rights based upon perceived embodied capacities, assistive technologies, companion animals, prosthetic devices, normative attitudes and beliefs, and even literary genres. As George Eliot reminds us in an often quoted passage from *Middlemarch* (1874), only the presence of a human subject can organize events and objects heretofore “going everywhere impartially” into a “concentric arrangement” (167).

The value of disability ecology stands out in contrast to prior models of disability. The medical, the social, and the business models theorize significant domains of disabled people’s lived experiences, yet each isolates the disabled person (or groups of disabled people) as an object to be acted upon by a particular discursive network. While these theoretical models illuminate the power of particular sets of relationships to influence disabled people’s lives, each

one—with its own criteria for organizing and critiquing disability—creates two unintentional byproducts. First, they suggest that disability is, for the most part, determined by one specific network or discourse—disability is, for example, embodied *or* social *or* an effect of market forces—when subjectivity is always a complex, unstable product of multiple networks that move in and out of positions of greater or lesser saliency depending on the disabled person’s social location.¹²

Second, these carefully defined models imply subdivisions within a disabled population that needs fewer opportunities to see itself as fractured and more chances to act collectively to secure equal rights for all its members. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (2010) address this problem by describing the social bloc of disabled people as a “multitude,” an appropriation of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s counterproposal to the homogenizing concepts of the “people” or “the masses” (“Disability as Multitude” 179). As a designation for “an active social subject” that is “composed of a set of singularities,” multitude preserves the internal difference of the disability community and foregrounds what the singularities have in common, which, in the case of disability, tends to be having “socially debilitating experiences” (“Disability as Multitude” 179; Hardt and Negri 100, 99; Mitchell and Snyder, “Disability as Multitude” 192). Mitchell and Snyder’s use of multitude makes sense as a macropolitical tool for resistance and represents a powerful model for thinking through the ways that disability can affect political change at local, national or global levels. However, both Mitchell and Snyder’s concept of disability as multitude and the dominant models of disability (medical, social, and business) leave the individual “singularities” who constitute the community relatively unexamined.

¹² This analytic subdivision also occurs in scholarship on literary disability and creates similar impasses. These challenges are addressed later in the chapter.

Disability subjectivities, the “singularities themselves,” require further theorization or else are at risk of being elided or erased.

Disability is a flexible and capacious designation for and an index of states of being that share a broad consensual definition, or what I call the *strong definition of disability*, as well as a range of specific, local definitions that do not necessarily map onto one another. *Gain* suggests this material-semiotic complexity by narrating the communicative misfirings between Laura and her surgeon, her oncologist, her ex-husband, and her daughter. Each actor who surrounds Laura attempts to classify or define Laura’s cancer but does so in a way that obscures it through the multiplication of local uses. Her surgeon, Dr. Jenkins, defines that cancer by stage, although the classification is indeterminate given the need for subsequent tests that themselves have large margins for error, but her radiologist, who is concerned with the likelihood of the cancer’s spread to other systems, defines the cancer by grade, meaning the size and shape of the tumor’s margins. Don Bodey translates each classification into a numeric variable for use in calculating Laura’s five-year survival rates, and Ellen, her daughter, only wants to know if the classifications signify that her mother will recover. Thus, each actor has a local usage of cancer that matters most to him or her—cancer as a function of rough or smooth tumor walls, cancer as the gatekeeper to familial stability—and while these definitions are not all complementary, together they produce “cancer” itself.

In order to build a model that can accommodate such a range of simultaneous usages of disability, I draw upon Bruno Latour’s work on Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Susan Leigh Star and Geoff Bowker’s work on boundary objects, and Annemarie Mol’s fieldwork on atherosclerosis. Together, their scholarship demonstrates that social practices and relationships drive the so-called hard science of the medical model and thus provide a foundation for my claim

that disability is always material, always social, and always ecological. Conceptualized by Bruno Latour, Michael Callon, and the sociologist John Law, ANT is a material-semiotic method that extends agency to nonhuman actors as it maps and describes the relationships between things (material) and concepts (semiotics) in transient, heterogeneous networks. ANT's creed compels the practitioner to "follow the actors themselves" as "a way to register the links between unstable and shifting frames of reference rather than simply [trying] to keep one frame stable" (Latour, *Reassembling* 12, 24). Allowing that ANT articulates a range of heterogeneous approaches, Scott Kirsch and Don Mitchell suggest that it is "broadly characterized by the rejection of a series of conceptually limiting (and putatively incapacitating) binary categories: macro/micro, subject/object, human/nonhuman, nature/society, local/global, theory/method, and structure/agency" (688). In order to develop ANT's "strange potential" (Latour, "On Recalling ANT" 23), Latour reframes his practice of ANT into an "ecological" approach in *Politics of Nature* (2003). Considered in this context, the resistance of marginalized actors to their own disqualification or exclusion become "ecological crises" that result in new totalities, emergent collectives that undergo perpetual reconfigurations that incorporate previously excluded standpoints. Disability ecology is similarly grounded in "deep ecology," meaning an awareness of a given subject's embeddedness in a dynamic "context or environment" (Sargisson 19), not the "shallow ecology" most often referred to as environmentalism (Naess 96). Such attention to a total field expresses a "desire for the redress of perceived imbalances in the distribution of value" (Sargisson 19) between nonnormative embodiments and the actors in their ecological networks.

Star and Bowker's category work and Mol's fieldwork on atherosclerosis can be used collaboratively to posit disability as a material-semiotic phenomenon. In institutional environments such as doctor's offices, hospitals, or rehabilitation centers, one often hears

patients (or, most often for disabled people, oneself) referred to by a diagnosis: “‘the bilateral amputee in 224’ or ‘the stroked out hemiplegic in 578’” (Albrecht 70). Such *diagnostic metonymies*, my term for these reductive descriptions, limit the complex subject to a single, medicalized, typically pathological trait. For this reason, many disability theorists critique this reductive practice, and Laura Bodey likewise bristles at “having her system referred to in the third person while she’s still in the room” (Powers 82). Yet diagnostic metonymies often serve important purposes in particular medical contexts. For example, the ubiquitous “we have a gunshot coming in,” so often heard in television medical dramas, performs an important organizational function by organizing various health care professionals with specific, localized roles and responsibilities into consensual collaboration. In this hypothetical emergency, as in actual ones, diagnostic metonymies prompt nurses, surgeons, and other triage personnel to initiate simultaneous protocols across a range of work practices in an attempt to provide critical, sometimes life-saving medical care. When diagnostic metonymies gain traction beyond medical necessity or when they are used to mediate interactions between the social worlds of disabled subjects and non-health care actors—in the workplace, the supermarket, or the playground, for example—oppression occurs.

These metonymic functions illustrate that categories like “disability” operate as “boundary objects,” meaning that each consensual, loose definition is composed of a range of local, specific ones. Star and Bowker define boundary objects as “those objects that both inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the informational [and work] requirements of each” (Bowker and Star 297). Such objects occur on the *boundary* between social worlds or communities of practice—health care providers and disabled people, for example—and act as *objects* because entities act toward or with them, not because they are necessarily composed of

“prefabricated stuff” or demonstrate “‘thing’-ness” (Star 603).¹³ *Gain* situates Laura’s cancer on the border of many social worlds, and her initial consultation with the “specialist in Indy,” presumably another oncologist who arranges her course of chemotherapy, demonstrates the distinct differences that boundary objects typically coordinate. When the specialist describes Laura’s tumor as “Grade Three,” Laura asks a simple follow-up question, “‘how can you tell it’s a Grade Three,’” which he misinterprets as an attack on his diagnostic abilities. His immediate response, “‘Well, I’ll grant you that the measurement is somewhat subjective’” (Powers 110), suggests that cancer, for him, is also an opportunity to validate his professional capabilities. Later in the same conversation, he recommends a second-look surgery after she completes her course of chemotherapy, and when she asks “‘what will that tell,’” meaning what new information will this procedure reveal, he again misinterprets her and replies, “‘Well, you may be right. There’s some debate about whether invasive second-look surgery is reliable enough to merit the possible complications’” (Powers 110–1). The specialist’s miscomprehension of Laura’s questions suggests that their distinct social locations—cancer patient, radiologist—structure specific, divergent understandings of cancer that come into uneasy contact under the strong definition.

The boundary object is a useful tool for understanding how the varied, specific meanings of disability achieve a consensual stability in dominant culture. By framing disability as a boundary object, one can prise open the monolithic, durable category of “disability” and reveal a

¹³ Star and James Griesemer first articulate the concept in their article, “Institutional Ecology, ‘Translations,’ and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals on Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology” (1989). In their analysis of the museum’s founding, Star and Griesemer discover that various groups with nonconsensual interests often work collaboratively by treating objects both in communal, ill-defined ways and in particular, strictly defined ways. They discovered that ornithological specimens serve as boundary objects when they connect the disparate interests of amateur birders, who are the primary collectors for the museum, and of professional biologists, who organize and legitimize the specimens. The birders do not necessarily have an investment in the material practices of the biologists, who do not, in turn, necessarily care about the leisure activities of the birders. However, the specimens allow both groups to satisfy their idiosyncratic interests by working together.

complex and fluid network of relationships between the disabled subject and other actors, including non-human ones, whose individual concepts of “disability” constitute the strong definition as it is commonly understood.¹⁴ Together, the disabled person, the boundary object, and the social worlds it connects function as an ecology, meaning the aggregate of interactional relationships between organisms and other actors in their environments. Once the local, non-consensual formations of disability are made to appear, one can choose to listen to their individual claims or to help them speak. In this way, a more objective, comprehensive, and egalitarian concept of disability can emerge.

Annemarie Mol’s field-defining *The Body Multiple* (2002) serves as a template for this type of investigation, finding that multiple local uses of a consensual term (atherosclerosis) actually produce discrete conceptual objects. Like Star, Mol understands that “the objects handled in practice are not the same from one site to another” even if they trade under the same name (Mol 5). Instead of considering atherosclerosis as a “single [point] of focus of different people’s perspectives,” which suggests that a single objective atherosclerosis exists that is simply interpreted in multiple ways, she describes each atherosclerosis as an aggregated thing “manipulated in practices” by actors as diverse as “the body, the patient, the disease, the doctor, the technician, [and] the technology” (4-5). Each socio-material practice produces and maintains a specific ontology that establishes a given atherosclerosis as a discrete object. Thus, for Mol, atherosclerosis only becomes legible when one accounts for the entire range of extant atheroscleroses. The more capacious category “disability,” one that collects a host of diseases,

¹⁴ One might be inclined to visualize this investigative work as peeling an onion, with the removal of each layer leading toward a greater understanding of the core, or apex, where the axillary bud lies dormant, ready to reproduce the whole onion. Yet a boundary object is less like a common onion and more like a bulb of garlic—as you peel it open, you reveal many similar yet self-contained cloves until, suddenly, you realize there is no center at all.

including atherosclerosis, and other non-medical differences, is likewise a composite of different practices and nonnormative embodiments.

Disability ecology breaks from these STS (Science, Technology, and Society) approaches by emphasizing the human subject as the epicenter of such networks and by actively intervening in the disability ecologies it reveals through acts of interpretation. For Latour, networks *themselves* take center stage, while for Mol each atherosclerosis appears as a coequal of the others. In this light, Latour's and Mol's work may be said to *concern* disabled people, but not directly *involve* them. Kirsch and Mitchell challenge STS approaches such as these for their failure to acknowledge that within such networks power may be “relational and may have numerous points of contact, application, or effect” while also being “‘centered’ — centered in institutions, in individuals, or in structured social relations” (691). They resist the disciplinary neutrality of a typical STS approach due to the methodological disinterest in “the search for causes of, and thus accountability for, the effects of power which it traces” (692). A crucial difference between ANT and disability ecology concerns the role of critique. For Latour, a good ANT account relies upon purely descriptive writing to “*deploy actors as networks*” and resists the urge to criticize or explain (*Reassembling* 136–140, emphasis in original), while disability ecology insists on no such prohibition. In this study of literary fiction, disability ecology actively intervenes in the disability ecologies it reveals through acts of interpretation. As Gary Albrecht rightly argues, “it is the *person* that has the social position and relationships with others,” not the ecology itself (71).

Crip/Queer Phenomenology under the Sign of Disability Ecology

The strong definition of disability conceals the social relationships that transform arbitrary corporeal, neurological, or psychological characteristics into signs used to justify socio-

political marginalization and exclusion. Through the lens of disability ecology, disability appears as a flexible material-semiotic object that typically operates at the local level in a variety of strictly defined, competing formulations and at the general, loosely defined level as a criterion for socio-economic disqualification. The embodied experience of these contingent networks produce *disability subjectivities* that structure disabled subjects' social orientations, meaning both the physical and ideological points-of-view that appear as natural and given. While disability activists have long drawn attention to the ways that the built environment directs and denies disabled people's lives through varying degrees of accessibility, disability ecology extends this awareness to the social and ideational environment, investigating how attitudes, beliefs, and practices inflect disabled subjectivities through the performance of normalcy. "To be orientated," Sara Ahmed argues, "is also to be turned to certain objects, those that help us find our way" (Ahmed 1). Of course, a turn toward one object is a turn away from another, perhaps many others. When social protocols direct disabled lives toward ableist objects or goals and away from objects and experiences that validate nonnormative embodiments as benign human variation, those actions risk alienating disabled people from their own best interests as nonnormatively embodied subjects. Just as Ahmed's project involves "redirecting our attention to different objects" than those used to produce and propagate heteronormative standards (3), disability ecology emphasizes those objects that matter to disabled people and that ableist culture typically discounts or overlooks. Disability ecology also shares with queer phenomenology a commitment to revealing their subjects as active knowledge producers whose very existence marks a form of resistance against hegemonic, normative identity.

Gain speaks to the phenomenological power of disability subjectivity when Laura considers her home from her new post-operative and –diagnosis embodiment. Laura awakens

into disability subjectivity—meaning a social “location of consciousness, knowing, thinking, or feeling” (Moser 377) that responds to disability—by becoming acutely aware of the materiality of embodiment that the figure of the liberal subject typically represses. Contemporary notions of the liberal individual emphasize autonomy and self-reliance, what Ingunn Moser refers to as “centred control,” meaning a subject’s capacity to act as an agent based upon “a competence that implies that the person knows, has an overview of the situation, can control it, and is in a position to act” (Moser 381). As a recipe for a normative subject, “centred control” masks the network of “embodied relations and arrangements” that human subjects have with sets of “ordered relations” and other non-human actors such as infrastructural networks, social institutions, and technologies (Moser 382, 381). Disability productively unmask this phantom.

After recognizing the way that cancer allows her body to be commoditized, Laura uses her embodied experiences of the disease and its treatment to perceive the ways that the logic of consumption had shaped her pre-diagnosis sense of her home both spatially and affectively. Because she moves more slowly during her recovery from the hysterectomy than she had before, her house becomes “much bigger than it was”; sedated, she no longer remembers which rooms connect, and the house seems a tenuous, contingent assemblage of components (Powers 93). As her sense of time and distance as quantifiable objects changes, so does her sense of their relative values. She thinks that her formerly pride-inducing square footage is “massively irrelevant,” that the designation of particular rooms for particular functions has less to do with their use value—“Utility room, laundry room, rec room, study, den. How many things must one person do? How many rooms does anyone need to do them in?”—and everything to do with the expectation to furnish them through acts of consumption (93). The home that had buffered her from thoughts of mortality before her diagnosis, she realizes, has “never been anything more than an obligation”

to be filled with “her carefully coordinated furniture” (93). Laura’s home operates as a composite body that disaggregates into fragments when seen through the lens of disability while Clare achieves durability through the accretion of legal discourses and socio-political institutions.

In addition to accounting for the agentic capacity of nonhuman actors, conceptualizing disability subjectivities through the lens of ecology provides two other immediate advantages. First, an ecological approach preserves the integrity of the human subject while insisting that relationships with other actors—including prosthetic technologies—matter and have material effects. Such a view arrests the presumably benevolent impulse to describe nonnormative embodiments as sites for the elaboration of a posthuman subject capable of transcending the so-called limitations of embodiment. Donna Haraway argues that such views typically produce “some kind of blissed-out technobunny joy in information” (Gane and Haraway 139). Despite such formations seeming to celebrate “rootlessness, alienation, and psychological distance between individuals and groups,” as Arjun Appadurai argues, those formations also typically foster “fantasies (or nightmares) of electronic propinquity” (Appadurai 28). These models of discontinuity often double deal by celebrating discontinuity while fetishizing imagined prosthetic connections that seamlessly articulate the “somatic architecture” of the body with technological artifacts (Marketou and Dominguez).¹⁵ In a troubling illustration of this phenomenon, Barbara E. Gibson appropriates Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “body without organs” to support her claim that the “myriad relationships between persons with disabilities and the machines, tools, persons, or animals that assist them” demand that “dependency” be reconsidered as “connectivity” (Gibson 187). Yet her reasoning ultimately treats the body *with* organs as a

¹⁵ The recent biomedical turn toward a science of life on the molecular level, as Nikolas Rose (2007) argues, engages the same hope for a mythic plenitude of enhancement but does so by mystifying the adaptability of the human genome. The molecular turn results not in a utopic appropriation of Haraway’s cyborg or Deleuze and Guattari’s “Body without Organs,” but in a fantasy of the hyperbiological body. For a critique of this molecular trajectory, see Jürgen Habermas’s *The Future of Human Nature* (2003).

similarly virtual apparatus. Writing about a man who “breathes with a ventilator” and uses many other technological artifacts to eat, talk, and move, she claims:

He is a fluid body, not a subject, but a conglomeration of energies. He has replaceable parts. When the biological part fails, it is replaced by a metal and plastic one. When that fails, it is upgraded. New, shiny, smooth parts replace old, obsolete ones. The number of body holes increase, and they are filled with tubes, liquids and gases. (Gibson 191)

Setting aside the curious omission of this man’s own account of his embodied experience—Gibson quotes directly two other people she uses to illustrate her postmodern (non)subject—as well as the question of who exactly *pays* for these perpetual “upgrades” under the conditions of a neoliberal state that typically renders disabled people as non-productive, even Gibson’s triumphal assessment cannot free itself of the disabled body’s all-too-material burden. Despite the apparent joy taken in this paradigmatic description of a posthuman being (“He is an *excitation*,” she claims (191, emphasis added)), Gibson is forced to acknowledge the irreducibility of the body amid her technofetishist formulation. For the body without organs to continue its relentless tacking between deterritorialization and reterritorialization, she admits that one has to “keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn...to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity...to respond to the dominant reality” (Deleuze and Guattari qtd. in Gibson 191). While Gibson treats this nebulous kernel of the embodied subject as a pesky remainder, disability ecology considers it the cornerstone of the human subject.

Just as Donna Haraway resists identifying her work as posthuman, I define disability ecology against those concepts of difference that frame nonnormative embodiment as a missing link to the nirvana of dematerialized databodies. “I never wanted to be posthuman, or

posthumanist,” Haraway writes, for “there is still urgent work to be done in reference to those who must inhabit the troubled categories of woman and human” (“Encounters” 99). Even if one were to find seductive the fantasy of a seamless and comfortable wetware-hardware interface, the classification of humans who use prosthetic limbs or other assistive devices as posthuman effaces those subjects’ perpetual disqualification from full participation in civic and social life. Maybe there is an advantage to never being “human,” but surely it is an act of privilege to presume that this is so. Moreover, framing disability as an occasion of posthuman exceptionality obscures the economic realities of neoliberal capitalism that make such a posthumanism inaccessible for a majority of the population, disabled or non-disabled. With more than a quarter of disabled adults in the U.S. living below the poverty line (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 18), access to prosthetics, especially the advanced technologies that inspire posthuman fetishization, remain unobtainable. Only ableist privilege keeps one from realizing that a subject must first be human before she can transcend it.

Second, the ecological approach provides a method for textual interpretation that exposes the discursive sweep of disability as a category while it transforms a narratological practice that is largely anthropocentric. If the heart of any narrative, as Roland Barthes suggests, lies in its sequence of cardinal functions, meaning those textual descriptions of actions that are foundational to the plot, disability ecology implies that the sense of what constitutes a cardinal function may vary depending on the network of actors that critics identify in a given scene or text (Barthes, “Structural Analysis” 248). A reading informed by disability ecology combines critical reading’s awareness of narrative as an ideologically charged cultural production with close reading’s attention to the relationship between word, syntax, and pattern. Just as disability ecology asserts that disability appears within a network of practices performed in many social

locations and through various discourses, an ecological reading of literary narrative asserts that disability appears in a text not as either a social or a physical object but as a material-semiotic practice performed by multiple actors, including disability-evoking signifiers or signs, representations, and formal elements. Because any socio-material network may pass out of existence or shape shift from one form to another before the observer can see it in full, let alone reach any conclusions, the critic must produce a descriptive account of the social relations between the various actors that together produce a given disability. While this task proves difficult when the object is a disabled person, for these aggregates of ephemeral actors exist only during action and exhibit an effervescence that makes them difficult objects to perceive, let alone analyze,¹⁶ one can turn to literary representations of disability to trace the thematic representations and formal traces of disability textualized in literary fiction. Such readings simultaneously critique the systemic gaps in literary criticism that disability studies has long assailed, productively “disabling” those traditions instead of folding disability into a larger set of textual signs worth noting in normative ways, and establish disability subjectivity as a valid site of knowledge production.¹⁷

As lived manifestations of disability ecologies, disability subjectivities provide opportunities to challenge dominant presumptions of normative embodiment, to reinvigorate aesthetics through a turn away from idealism to corporeal affectivity, and to effect social change by insisting on disability as “a form of diversity, and [...] as a critical concept for thinking about human identity in general” (Siebers, *Disability Theory* 3). In this way, disability subjectivities

¹⁶ A socio-material network comes into being at a particular moment and passes out of existence when those acts are complete, when some actors leave the network, or when new actors are enrolled (Latour, *Reassembling* 65).

¹⁷ This movement within disability theory is perhaps best exemplified by the work of James Charlton’s *Nothing about Us without Us* (2000), Paul K. Longmore’s *The New Disability History* (2001), and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006), as well as their work on disability as a category outside non-productive labor power, “Disability as Multitude: Re-working Non-Productive Labor Power” (2010).

demonstrate certain affinities with Donna Haraway's cyborg-subject who invalidates "the founding myth of original wholeness" and does not perceive "the drama of life to be individuation, separation, the birth of the self, and the tragedy of autonomy" ("Manifesto" 33, 34). Instead of affirming the normative autonomous subject, disability subjectivities demonstrate that all human subjects are permanently partial, aggregate beings who undergo ceaseless transformation based upon the quantity and quality of their relations to other human and non-human actors. To the inextricable relationships shared by non-normative bodyminds and discursive practices we now turn, for these entanglements matter not only to literary figures but also to matters of literal life and death.

Subjects without End: Human and Nonhuman Actors in Literary Disability Narrative

Gain represents disability subjectivity as a more democratic and mimetic model of human subjectivity itself. While normative characterizations underwritten by the ideology of ability typically privilege the trope of autonomy over the complex, networked relationships that most humans experience (Garland-Thomson 22), Powers's novel refuses to present Laura through a minoritizing view of difference. Arguing against an essentialist distinction between disabled and non-disabled subjects even as it uses disability as an instrument to register its critique, the novel represents Laura's development of a disability subjectivity that interrogates and gradually displaces her typical assumptions about normative subjectivity under late capitalism. Disabled by her cancer and the chemotherapy drugs meant to treat it, she learns that so-called "healthy" human subjects only temporarily inhabit states of non-disability that are naturalized through cultural practices and discourse.¹⁸ After her first three-day chemotherapy treatment, Laura realizes that "no one really knows their real body" and that "well-being is nothing but an

¹⁸ Some in the disability community refer to those who are not currently disabled with the shorthand "TABS," meaning the Temporarily Able-Bodied.

impostor, a beautiful girl who turns into a hag at neap tide when the spell breaks and reason at last sees through her” (Powers 129).

Clearly, Laura’s revelations are not only metaphysical. By dramatizing Laura’s change in subjectivity, Powers argues that disability produces knowledge about the material and social world shared by all human and non-human subjects. She recognizes that dominant culture is insulated from the knowledge that disability subjectivity makes available to the extent that “nobody knows what’s blossoming inside” his or her body because of the soporific effects of “the standing, routine pileup of diversions” that pass as expressive individualism (94–95). The narrative demonstrates how the networked, non-optional links between individual bodies, features of the natural and built environments, and the subject’s social location coalesce into a durable disability ecology that, in turn, produces disability and disability subjectivities. Powers focuses particularly on Laura’s lived experience of cancer, and this emphasis brings attention to a set of regulatory and classificatory beliefs and practices of a biopolitical medical industry that has long attended people with disabilities.

Many of Laura’s experiences can be read through the dehumanizing lens of the “sick role,” meaning a particular social role that ill or otherwise disabled subjects are expected to perform. to a subject’s experience of illness. First defined by Talcott Parsons in *The Social System* (1951), the sick role has four distinct characteristics: one bears no responsibility for one’s illness, one is exempt from normal obligations, one should try to get well, and one must seek competent help (437). The first two characteristics serve a “good function,” according Mol, for they provide accommodations to the sick person, while the final two characteristics perform negative functions in that they impose requirements on the subject, thus rendering the sick role

undesirable (8).¹⁹ Both sets of expectations work in concert to transform her into a disabled subject: while the former frames her as a recipient of compensation for her diminished capacities, the latter creates personal responsibilities of self-maintenance out of heretofore systemic obligations.²⁰ Laura's experiences as a person disabled both by cancer and its debilitating treatment demonstrate these competing criteria. For example, at her first post-operative consult, Laura is relieved of responsibility by her surgical oncologist, Dr. Jenkins. Jenkins admits that medical science has not achieved consensus on the causes of ovarian cancer, assures Laura that the diagnosis *was not her fault*, and renders her a victim of a force beyond her control. Following Jenkins's advice to live her life as before, Laura continues to work during the early months of her chemotherapy. Presenting his act as one of goodwill, her employer, Lindsey, renders Laura exempt from the typical obligations that define her selfhood. Although the effects of her treatment give her less energy to follow up on her leads, she continues to make sales. When her sales numbers fall below her quota and potential clients comment on her appearance, Lindsey places her on leave, offers her cash to stay financially solvent, and tells her she can return to work when she feels up to it. Contrary to Mol's reading of exemption as a "good

¹⁹ On these elements of the sick role, Mol writes, "since escaping from the usual obligation to work means that 'being sick' may also be attractive, there is potentially a threat [to the social order]. If everybody were to stop working by calling themselves sick, the system would collapse. This is why... 'the sick role' has two more elements" (Mol 7). Mol eventually argues that Parson's sick role is limited due to its basis in functionalism, a method that explains events solely with respect to their impacts on the social system.

²⁰ Prior to the neoliberal turn in the late 20th century—an ideological shift marked by the ascension of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and by the "Washington Consensus" fueled by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in the 1990s—the postwar U.S. state had been organized according to the principles of "embedded liberalism" (Harvey 11). According to David Harvey, an embedded liberal state surrounds market activities with "a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment" in order to focus on "full employment, economic growth, and the welfare of its citizens" (Harvey 10). Neoliberal politicians, corporations, and activists hope to spring capital from these restraints. In order to achieve this aim, neoliberal proponents attempt to rend any social safety net by opposing collective decision making and interpersonal solidarity with market logic that transforms subjects into "juridical individuals" who interact according to "freely negotiated contractual obligations" (Harvey 64). Whereas the embedded liberal state shouldered some responsibility for the health and welfare of its citizens, the "free" neoliberal citizen "is responsible for his or her own actions and well-being" in the "realms of welfare, education, health care, and even pensions" (65). Under such a system, as Laura learns, one would do well to remember Marx's argument that within a capitalist system, "the worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale" (272–3).

function” of the sick role (Mol 8), Laura experiences Lindsey’s actions as a form of oppression that deprived her of the right to make a living and that unraveled the prior relationships that had produced her pre-diagnosis subjectivity.

Due to her interactions with familial, social, and economic networks, Laura feels compelled to “try to get well” and “seek competent help,” the two corrective elements in the sick role. These two elements operate as a pivot between the functionalist sick role conceived under a self-consciously liberal welfare state at midcentury and the biopolitical self-regulating subject constituted by the ideologically neoliberal state at the century’s end. As the postwar state turned away from embedded liberalism toward neoliberalism after a period of “stagflation” in the 1970s, each citizen became “responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being” in all facets of life, including health care (Harvey 65). Under the authority of a normalizing biomedical regime, each individual must “analyze, reflect [on], and normalize” his or her health as part of being a good citizen (Fries 355). While this exercise of biopower occurs *for* the benefit of the state, which can draw upon its self-regulating population as a strategic resource, the responsibility of maintaining health shifts *from* the state to the individual (355). All subjects under neoliberalism are encouraged to practice techniques of self-care, a phenomenon that transforms formerly “healthy” normative subjects into vulnerable ones who must constantly guard against their eventual, inevitable slippage into illness or disability. As soon as Laura is diagnosed, her family and close friends presume that she will try to get well, which initially means traveling to Indianapolis to meet with a specialist who determines her course of treatment without having read her chart (Powers 109). They also expect her to try all available options in an attempt to be cured. After she declines a second round of chemotherapy, she worries over her decision’s effects on her young children: she continues to feel guilt despite her

phenomenological knowledge of the treatment's injurious effects and her rational judgment about the slim chance that it could work. In the same vein, friends and acquaintances often remind her to maintain a "positive outlook," to visualize away the cancer, as though they presume that there is more that Laura herself could or should do. Even Lindsey, whose offer for sick leave renders Laura exempt, expects her to seek curative treatment in order to return to the sales force, although a cynic may argue that his offer to hold open her position is made with the expectation that he will not have to honor it. Laura only allows herself to slough her guilt when Tim, her son, tells her that she no longer has to fight for life on their behalf.

Entangled in a web of medical professionals and facilities that treat her as a consumer and a commodity, Laura undergoes profound transformations in her subjectivity. These adaptations that disability makes available demonstrate how her non-disabled subjectivity functions upon ideological beliefs and practices that mystify particular material conditions that her disability reveals. Diagnosed as ill and, therefore, disqualified from full participation in civic and social life, Laura moves through a variety of medical facilities that strip her of all social roles but that of care receiver. She sees hospitals as sites of commerce and her specialist's office as a "giant, state-of-the-art cancer-fixing factory that enjoys a regional monopoly," a site where she passes as raw material through "the medical equivalent of one of those assembly lines" (112). Dominant culture does not frame the sick individual as a productive agent or a producer of knowledge, she learns, but as a raw material to be transformed by the medico-industrial complex on the one hand and as a faithful, dependent consumer on the other. Powers drives this double-edged reduction home in an instance of dark irony: the narrator divulges that many of the chemicals in her ineffective course of chemotherapy are Clare products and that Mercy

Foundation Hospital, where she undergoes treatment, owes its modern facilities to philanthropic gifts from the company.

Disability ecology asserts that the status of the non-human object, humankind's often neglected supplement, must be raised up. If we grant that an individual self never escapes some level of objectification, as Siebers claims when he writes, "A self is always another's object, and most of us manage the care of ourselves as if our self were our most precious object" (*The Subject* 134), it follows that we might also value the capacity of non-human objects to demonstrate agency and exert structural pressure on human subjects. Mutually responsive interaction "does not mean 'equality,'" as Donna Haraway argues, "but it does mean paying attention to the conjoined dance of significant otherness," her term for "patterns within which the players are neither wholes nor parts" (*Companion Species* 41, 12).

By framing Laura's cancer as a result of environmental pollution produced by Clare International, a company that has been granted corporate personhood, Powers emphasizes the agentic capacity of nonhuman actors. While readers easily grant agency to human characters in fiction, and even some nonhuman animals, fewer would grant agency to a corporation like Clare International. *Gain* anthropomorphizes Clare in a homologous narrative strand that recounts the company's growth into a fully-developed corporate personhood as a publicly-traded, multinational, limited liability corporation (Maliszewski 166) from its initial formation as a chandlery. In its description of the early 19th century trade business of Jephthah Clare, the father of the three founding brothers of Clare, the novel foregrounds the figural importance of networks: able to turn a profit due to the "sheer markup of distance," Jephthah "lived less in cities than on the sea routes between them" (Powers 7). The suggestion that Jephthah creates value by manipulating the interstices between nodes in a geographical network foregrounds the

novel's interest in the "magic of paperwork," meaning the social practices that produce human and non-human actors (8).²¹

The narrator's invocation of capital's occult powers establishes a frame in which to interpret Clare's manufactory turn and subsequent development. First a Boston chandlery, then a nationwide presence during Reconstruction, and finally a globally branded multinational corporation, Clare relies upon a network of social practices and emergent technologies to power its growth into its final form. For example, Clare benefits from technological advances in candle making equipment and practices; horizontal growth into soap making; the transcontinental railroad's capacity to collapse distance and transform once-remote towns into viable markets; a boom due to shrewd government contracts during the Civil War; and deft marketing practices in order to generate ever increasing profits. Despite founding brother Samuel Clare's belief that incorporation is "failure" because "an owner [who] couldn't manage his own firm without special privileges...had no right to stay in business," the widow of his brother Resolve, Julia Clare, convinces Samuel to incorporate when the company "had grown too large, profit had gone too wayward for any other solution" (Powers 175). An official charter of incorporation grants Clare protection from risk and constitutes the company as one "composite body" through legal language, including the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that extends due process to it (175, 179–80).

Yet *Gain* denies any attempt to read the novel as an outright indictment of incorporation through its ambivalent conclusion that ties the cure for cancer to the conditions that produced it in Laura. Now an adult, Tim Bodey works as a computer developer for a biotech start up, where he is part of a group that develops a "Janus-faced" algorithm capable of working in "two

²¹ Of course, the fact that Karl Marx discredits this belief of political economy in *Capital* with the labor theory of value troubles the narrative's economic mimesis, but not its figurative use of a nascent global capital network.

directions” (Powers 405). Applied to proteins, the program “told how a given sequence would fold up and behave” and “for any enzymatic action, the program also supplied a sequence recipe” (405). Such flexibility allows the program to interact with a “score of other machines” to create a “universal chemical assembly plant at the level of the cell” capable of producing “anything the damaged cell called out for” (Powers 405). It is implied that the first use for this new network of technologies will be to cure cancer. The description of the algorithm as “Janus-faced” links this discovery to the early soap making efforts of the original Clare brothers, who perceive soap as a “Janus-face intermediary between [the] seeming incompatibles” of soluble and insoluble materials (405, 50). This set of descriptions equates soap, the product that secured Clare’s success which, in turn, lead to the eventual release of the carcinogenic byproducts that caused Laura’s cancer, with cancer’s imminent cure. Likewise, Tim’s suggestion that “it might be time for the little group of them to incorporate” closes the novel with a recuperation of the term that has been linked to the unfolding tragedy of the narrative. That the money to incorporate, an act that will lead to cancer’s cure, will come from Tim’s inherited portion of the class-action settlement adds yet another instance of tragic irony to the novel’s argument.

Better Living as Chemistry: “Mutable Substance Had no Final Shape”

Representations of disability in *Gain* illustrate what disabled people, critical disability studies, and Science and Technology Studies (STS) theorists have long known: one can no longer think about the self as an autonomous agent who experiences freedom only when disembedded from social relationships. *Gain* frames Laura’s disability as an ecology constructed from an ever-changing network of social relationships between other human and non-human actors, such as the biomedical industry, the built environment, and the ideology of expressive

individualism.²² Powers grants positions at the front of the stage to the affective capacities of specific non-human actors such as medical protocols, chemotherapy drugs, corporate brand management methods, built environments, and abstract ideological structures like work, motherhood, and romantic partnership. The narrative connects each actor with Laura and explores how the interactions of their particular agentic forces structure her embodied experience of disability. Through these representations of human and non-human entanglements, particularly that of Laura and Clare International, *Gain* poses complex questions about the experience of nonnormative embodiments; environmental justice; the effects of capitalist logic as it interpellates noneconomic areas of human activity; the arbitrary natures of disability and ability as categories of disqualification and social inclusion, respectively; the porosity of the border between human and non-human actors; and the contingency of human subjectivities inflected by other bodies, technologies, built environments, and social institutions.

Powers twists the stories of Laura and Clare International into a helix that seems by the novel's end more like a Möbius strip—one cannot definitively state where the human or corporate agents begin or end. Powers does not create a story in which Laura and Clare intersect like two discreet, autonomous entities that encounter one another in a neutral field of nature. The novel depicts Clare's and Laura's development as inverse movements between embodiment and social practices and beliefs, and it represents this relationship by intertwining two narrative threads in which each subject is a principal player. After an opening section that introduces Lacewood,²³ the narrative immediately splits into two arcs that trace the complex entanglements

²² In his work on automobility, Cotten Seiler describes expressive individualism as an emergent ideology in early 20th century U.S. culture that stresses “expression and fulfillment of a unique inner self through commodified leisure and consumption” in order to “justif[y] the regimes of corporate capitalism and consumer culture” (Seiler 13, 12).

²³ These opening pages act as an overture for the themes that the novel will develop by introducing Lacewood's mid-nineteenth century bid to encourage Clare to locate a plant there, the town's resulting dependence on Clare for its economic and civic health, the transformative power of capitalist modes of production on personal and civic

between human and non-human actors and that demand the continuous evaluation of affinities between Laura's human and Clare's non-human subjectivities. One narrative arc focuses on the development of Clare International from the mid-nineteenth century to the near present, and the other focuses on Laura and the transformations that occur in her subjectivity as effects of disability during the last year of her life. Clare transcends the limitations of its material base through the semiotic effect of incorporation, and Laura gains a fuller awareness of embodiment by confronting language's inability to contain the excessive signification of cancer.

The contrapuntal motion of the novel asks the reader to consider the ways in which Clare and Laura mutually constitute one another. The story suggests an environment where both corporate and human subjects shape and are shaped by their networked relationships to a symbolic order that is itself shaped by the spread of late capitalism. Clare, a person under law, seems to function as the antagonist, the embodiment of the malign force of late capitalism that both causes Laura's cancer and monetizes her death by offering a cash settlement.²⁴ However, the novel goes to great lengths to demonstrate that both Laura's pre- and post-diagnosis subjectivities and the freedoms granted to corporate personhood are results of social practices, neither manifestations of transcendental powers nor the fruits of a transhistorical nature. Through this formation, the novel critiques conceptions of the post-Enlightenment subject who is an autonomous, free, and rational agent and who develops through various encounters with a nature that remains resolutely separate (Mansfield 11). But *Gain* does not figure the new, hybrid, and distributed subject as a fall from grace in need of cure or salvation.

identity, the small town's networked relationships with other geopolitical actors such as "London, Boston, Fiji, Disappointment Bay" that enable Clare's business development model, and the paradoxical invisibility that Clare enjoys in the town through its very ubiquity (Powers 3).

²⁴ By giving the company an anthropomorphic, presumptively feminine name, the novel invites the reader to consider the possible homologies between Clare's corporate personhood and Laura's disability subjectivity.

According to the logic of the narrative world that Powers creates, any barrier between the human agent and the social world is semi-permeable at best. Together, the two stories annealed within one narrative represent a contemporary human agent whose subjectivity cannot be rendered legible outside the network of mutually constituting relationships that he or she shares with other human and non-human actors.²⁵ Thus, both the human and the corporation in *Gain* appear as material-semiotic entities, effects of physical qualities and processes as well as products of language and semiotic systems. Collapsing the distinctions between the human and the non-human at their most fundamental level, the novel interrogates the meaning of being itself. Significantly, Powers conducts this interrogation by dramatizing the transition from mid-twentieth century assumptions about disabled subjects to a contemporary neoliberal model. Both Laura and Clare appear in states of perpetual becoming, non-teleological subjects who, like the chemical byproducts that Clare's chemists continuously repurpose, appear as "mutable substance" that has "no final shape" (Powers 164).

Given the richness and the breadth of these textual details, any critical analysis that does not plumb Laura's phenomenological experience of embodiment and the environment, her social locations in the disparate networks with which she routinely interacts, and her mutually constitutive relationship with Clare—understood in its full complexity as a geopolitical actor—fails to capture the full flower of her disability subjectivity. While the current paradigms employed in extant readings of literary representations of disability presume to speak primarily about texts as repositories for extratextual attitudes about disability, literary analysis can also produce knowledge about disability's reliance on sign systems to make meaning. Like the Clare

²⁵ Many of these alternating chapters are connected by representations of Clare's marketing copy, suggesting that as one moves away from productive labor, one remains bound to economic modes of production through the practices of affective labor.

facilities on the edge of town, disability is a “black box” until an ecological reading brings its constituent elements into view.

The details that Powers includes in the centuries-long history of Clare International suggest that the contemporary problems of multinational capitalism that the corporation embodies differ in degree but not in kind from those produced by its earlier incarnations. In the novel’s present, the corporation’s influence is ubiquitous in Lacewood, a “town [that] would have dozed forever”:

The town could not hold a corn boil without its corporate sponsor. The company cuts every other check, writes the headlines, sings the school fight song. It plays the organ at every wedding and packs the rice that rains down on the departing honeymooners. It staffs the hospital and funds the ultrasound sweep of uterine seas where Lacewood’s next of kin lie gray and ghastly, asleep in the deep. (5)

With a finger in every pie and the promise of its “ghastly” progeny threatening the future of the Lacewood, Clare appears as a present day incarnation of a set of concerns—from the development of the credit economy to the urbanization of rural space to the ethical stakes in capitalist accumulation—that has preoccupied American subjects since manufacturing decentered the agrarian economy in the late 19th century. Remarkably, although Laura is marked by ovarian cancer, the novel renders her unremarkable, a universal subject of late capitalism whose phenomenological experience of disability foregrounds the entangled relationships that produce any given subjectivity. Powers’s deployment of disability likewise rehearses a trope of characterization common in American realist novels of the *fin de siècle* that use disability as a foil in their critiques of the spread of capitalism, a case study in their justifications for the

expansion of the democratic polis, and as a catalyst meant to reinvigorate an aesthetic tradition beholden to the conventions of the old world. A conspicuous technique of life, disability is made to mark a conspicuous thematic and aesthetic nonconformity beginning in the late 19th century “aesthetic of the common” (Kaplan 13).

CHAPTER TWO

The Spectacular Banality of Literary Disability

... give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing!

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

The representation of disability has an efficaciousness that ultimately transcends the literary domain and refuses to be assimilated to it.

Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness*

Representation declines into genre.

Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?"

"You are making him, and he will be a monster"

The peony, an ornamental flower popularized in the United States during the 19th century (Matthaei-Nichols Arboretum), has been known for its medicinal qualities since antiquity. The earliest extant scientific treatment of the peony is found in *De Materia Medica*, a herbal written by the Greek physician Pedanios Dioscorides in 77 CE (Halda and Waddick 15). The peony's alleged medicinal properties are strongest in the root, less powerful in the flower, and most dilute in the leaves. When taken alone or in admixture as a tea, the peony has been used to treat a range

of ailments and general “troubles,” including muscle cramps, gout, arthritis, respiratory problems, skin diseases, heart trouble, migraine headaches, nervousness, and hemorrhoids (WebMD). The flowering *Paeoniaceae* was Anglicized as the peony after Paeon, a student of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, who angered his teacher by providing a root that could soothe women during childbirth (Liddell, Drisler, and Scott 1106). Zeus protected Paeon from Asclepius’s wrath by transforming him into the peony flower. In keeping with its namesake, the peony has many perceived benefits for women’s gynecological and obstetric health. Dioscorides writes, “Ten to twelve red grains from the fruit taken in rough wine stops menstrual flow and being eaten they ease stomach pains”; perhaps counterintuitively, the peony also “promotes menstruation” and can stimulate placental expulsion after delivery (qtd. in Halda and Waddick 16). Alongside its use as an emmenagogue, the peony has also been commonly considered an abortifacient, a substance used to induce abortion or miscarriage (Watts 1).

Curious, then, that Stephen Crane’s novella *The Monster* (1898), a narrative centrally concerned with Henry Johnson’s disability and its cultural effects, begins with the destruction of Dr. Trescott’s peony and ends with him “trying to count the cups” at his wife’s conspicuously unattended afternoon tea (Crane 147, 201). Neither peonies nor teacups appear outside the opening and concluding chapters, respectively, making them appear as conspicuous singularities in a narrative that trades in extended motifs. Price McMurray concludes that among critics who comment on the destruction of the peony in the opening chapter, “almost all...understand [it] as foreshadowing Henry’s fate” (McMurray 52),²⁶ and Susan Schweik echoes the critical opinion of the conclusion as being “famously anticlimactic,” a whimpering *coup de grâce* that “domesticate[s]” the novella’s narrative structure “by its feminization” (228). While “it would be

²⁶ McMurray reads the peony quite differently, however; for him, the broken peony that “hang[s] limply” in Jimmie’s hand reveals Jimmie’s castration anxiety (61).

difficult,” as Price McMurray suggests, “not to suspect Crane of quietly establishing a meaningful pattern of detail” (53) given *The Monster’s* recurrent uses of metonymic systems organized around railroads, electric and natural lights, and flowing water, the opening and closing images are most often taken for iconoclastic eruptions and interpreted as self-evident banalities instead of complimentary, meaningful bookends. Trescott’s peony and the cups that evoke its medicinal application establish a framing narrative that embeds Henry’s individual story within a broader eugenic discourse that sought to eliminate “defectives” from the population to improve national stock. Schweik provides a concise summary of the novella that appropriately emphasizes the foundational role of disability in the narrative:

A black man in a small New York town, Henry Johnson, rescues the son of a white doctor from a burning house, survives so badly burned that he now has “no face,” and is subsequently terrorized by the horrified townspeople; the white doctor, in turn, saves Johnson’s life, refuses to mercy kill or institutionalize him, and is subsequently ostracized by the townspeople. (218)

In this context, Crane’s account of a disabled protagonist and his social and civic oppression illustrates a trend in literary realism and naturalism more broadly: disability is made to signify through equally quiet, equally meaningful patterns of textual signs.

A cursory reading of the opening chapter seems to support the consensus opinion that McMurray describes. Jim Trescott, the doctor’s young son, runs through his father’s garden pretending to be a locomotive, accidentally crushes one of his father’s ornamental flowers with his wagon wheel, and surveys the damage: “[Jim] looked at his father and at the broken flower. Finally he went to the peony and tried to stand it on its pins, resuscitated, but the spine of it was hurt, and it would only hang limply from his hand. Jim could do no reparation” (Crane 147).

According to the collective reading, the injured peony anticipates Henry's fate, an interpretation that relies on the presumption that the physical and social transformations Henry experiences are caused by his embodiment, not imposed upon him by external actors. If the peony stands in for Henry, Jim foreshadows his father as both a destructive agent and an ineffective healer. Jim's locomotive fantasy has a causal relationship with the irreversible destruction of the peony, just as Trescott's fantasy of medical cure creates the conditions that render impossible Henry's resumption of a nondisabled identity. Neither Jim nor Trescott can return the objects of their actions to their original states, and their very different interventions—carelessness in the garden, carefulness in the *ad hoc* medical clinic—are established as commensurate. Read this way, the peony scene affirms the town judge's belief that Trescott performs “one of the blunders of virtue” by saving Henry, implying that it would have been better left undone and Henry left to die (168). Trescott's ornamental flower has been clipped, and its death is imminent; smart-dressing Henry has been disfigured, and he has become the living dead. Better to die than to live disabled, this reading of the peony seems to say.

Read another way, the peony scene anticipates the novella's representation of the material-semiotic nature of disability and its meditation on the cultural roots of oppression. This interpretation counters the assumption that Johnson's story is the only primary one in the novella; Dr. Trescott's story is equally important not least because it describes the network of actors that produce Henry's disablement and social death. Remembering that the peony is named for a healer whose egalitarian practices incurred his master's wrath, the peony can be read as foreshadowing Trescott himself, whose life-saving medical intervention would sustain Henry if not for the social processes of ostracism that reduce Henry to bare life and render Trescott a

persona non grata in Whilomville.²⁷ In this alternative interpretation, Jim represents the townspeople themselves, a collective heavily invested in social performances made possible by the instruments of mechanical progress, such as electric streetcars and arc lamps, that the novella frames as exemplary of an encroaching, dehumanizing urbanity. Jonathan Tadashi Naito argues that the citizens who congregate in the town's electrically illuminated avenues and local park "fixate on themselves, but not on themselves as individuals; rather, they fixate on themselves as part of an electrically produced, modern crowd" (45). This modern mass, preoccupied with the "effacement"—a word Crane uses throughout *The Monster*—of its anachronistic individuality for the comfort of modern normalcy, scapegoats Henry first for his dandyish *flânerie* that contests his social role as a subordinate member of the community due to his race and second for the threat his disfigurement poses to the ideology of ability that undergirds modernity. Jim's microcosmic encapsulation of Whilomville society is emphasized when he behaves with "the air of a [sideshow] proprietor" by putting Henry on display for his schoolmates even though he had previously been very friendly with Henry and owes him his life (189). Unlike Paeon, Dr. Trescott can expect no divine intervention to protect him from the wrath he incurs by providing medical care to someone judged unfit, and his custodial care of Henry causes his reputation to turn from "being the leading doctor in town to about the last one" (199). In fact, Judge Hagenthorpe—the novella's embodiment of legal discourse—suggests that the town sees Trescott as playing God himself: "[Henry] will be your creation, you understand. He is purely

²⁷ Henry's disfigurement produces morphological as well as ontological effects: the brakeman who pulls him to safety does not rescue a man but brings "forth a *thing* which he [lays] on the grass" (163 emphasis added).

your creation. Nature has very evidently given him up. He is dead. You are restoring him to life. You are making him, and he will be a monster” (169).²⁸

Judge Hagenthorpe’s discussion with Trescott signals the narrative’s shift in focus from Henry toward Trescott, and this shift is often read critically as the novella’s abandonment of racial themes. The new focus has been considered a defect for its supposed uncritical replication of the marginalization Henry experiences by the townspeople. This line of thinking, to borrow a phrase from Susan Schweik, suggests that race is political and disability is not when, of course, both identities are politically intersectional (220). The turn in narrative focus does reduce the amount of attention given to Henry’s physical actions, but it does so in order to foreground the cultural effects that produce his disability. Cultural effects of disability often have little to do with a given impairment, whether somatic or cognitive, so the narrative shift formally embodies the powerful yet distributed methods by which external actors materially disable a subject. Hagenthorpe’s declaration of Henry’s death, for example, can only signal the death of Henry’s social being, the stripping of his right to participate in society, for Henry is very much alive and capable: he retains his pre-injury physical capacities despite the townspeople presuming that his somatic transformation has left him with a diminished cognitive capacity and without “much of him to hurt anymore” (Crane 168, 185).

The novella dramatizes the ecology of medical, legal, economic, and social beliefs and practices that disable Henry and maintain hegemonic normalcy by narrating a series of parallel discussions that actively produce, regulate, and eliminate difference. One set involves Trescott, who embodies medical discourse, and other symbolic townspeople including the judge, the chief businessman John Twelve, and the chief of police, and the second set involves Martha Goodwin,

²⁸ Echoes of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) are unmistakable in Judge Hagenthorpe’s language; for an analysis of Crane’s appropriation of *Frankenstein* in *The Monster*, see Elizabeth Young’s *Black Frankenstein* (2008), specifically Chapter 2, “Black Monsters, Dead Metaphors” (68-106).

an “engine” of social opinion who “was sure to have a considerable effect of the one kind or the other in the life of the town” (187), and the young women who come to her kitchen for gossip. While the town elders work to maintain the hegemonic normalcy of Whilomville, Goodwin freely critiques the hypocrisy of the townspeople, particularly the Winters family. The Winters claim that Henry so frightened the daughter, Sadie, by peering through a window at a birthday party that she has been sick ever since, and they hold Trescott responsible. Goodwin objects, stating that Sadie has ““been to school almost the whole time since then,”” and claims that if she had been in Trescott’s place, ““I’d have knocked that miserable Jake Winter’s head off”” (196).

The women who gather in Goodwin’s kitchen express disbelief in her empirical observation, preferring instead the dramatic, fictional narrative of Henry’s effects. In this way the novella makes clear that the rights to social and civic life are not inborn, as the cultural imaginary might attest, but are bestowed upon subjects by external actors who can rescind or suspend those rights without cause or justification. Henry does not need to be physically present for his future to be contested and his subjectivity to be re-structured. In fact, the town hegemons prefer his containment and erasure: before Hagenthorpe can freely express his eugenic perspective, he must remove Trescott from Henry’s bedside, suggesting that the mechanisms of normalcy and subordination in Whilomville can only function “away from the magic of [Henry’s] unwinking eye” that bears witness to them (Crane 168). This experience of marginalization suggests that Henry’s fate, like the fates of disabled people throughout U.S. history, is one in which he must continually fight to become “participatory agents in their own lives” (Longmore and Umansky 16). Trescott serves as a buttress against the normalizing discourses of the law and capitalism, and he contests this process of social devaluation in his response to the judge’s condemnations of his actions: ““He will be what *you* like, judge”” (Crane

169, emphasis added). In this way, *The Monster* offers a properly political material-semiotic model of disability that Crane's complex textual representation of disability renders legible.

Although Crane is known for his naturalism, an aesthetic presumptively bound to the persistence of biological determinism, he demonstrates in this narrative the material effects of social beliefs and practices that structure Henry's disability subjectivity. In its openness concerning the material-semiotic nature of disability, *The Monster* is anomalous in a genre teeming with the monstrous. By dramatizing the coalition of discourses—most prominently racial, religious, medical, and legal—that disqualifies Henry from social and civic life, Crane produces a disability ecology that is more “real” than Henry's faceless post-accident body but less “realistic” than the concrete details strewn throughout realist fiction. Perhaps Crane's nuanced appreciation for the variegated sources of social oppression contributed to Ralph Ellison's estimation of the novella as “one of the parents of the modern American novel” (65). Written under an aesthetic banner that fought for the mimetic fullness of the detail, *The Monster* lays bare the semiotic, syntactic, and semantic systems of literary representation that actively produce disability and impart meaning to it. To these systems, let us now turn our own unwinking critical faculties.

The Disability Effect

Literary representations of disability reveal the tremendous aesthetic and political powers scripted into individual detail. In *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), Tobin Siebers offers the most sustained contemporary analysis of details attending bodily representations of disability in literary art. Applying a visual cultural approach to descriptions of disability, Siebers foregrounds the affective capacity of images of bodily or cognitive difference evoked by specific textual figures. According to Siebers, literary descriptions of disabilities operate as *puncta*, Roland

Barthes's term for photographic details that "lash, cut, and abrade a large visual field to make the image of difference appear" (*Aesthetics* 126, 128). Against a presumptively normative textual background, a description of disability (like the *punctum*, a detail that proclaims its difference in the broader field of the text) "rises from the scene, shoots out of it, and pierces" the reader-spectator (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 26; Siebers, *Aesthetics* 129). Siebers's interest in the affective capacity of disability decenters the dominant conventions of a nonmaterialist aesthetics premised on "separat[ing] the pleasures of art from those of the body," and he aims to establish disability as a producer of knowledge "about the ways that some bodies make other bodies feel" by reintroducing a consideration of bodily sensation into aesthetics (*Aesthetics* 1, 20). While Siebers's approach suits the visual arts, the most consistent object of his analysis, it is not yet fully transportable to literary representations of disability. When embedded in a literary text, the *punctum* that Siebers describes depends on its immanent textual being—that momentary flash of affective sensation—as well as its transcendent meaning to transform an otherwise arbitrary sign into disability. A word or phrase in a novel, for example, can only operate as a *punctum*—as a detail that demarcates difference and concentrates readerly attention—if it produces meaning based upon its relations to other signs in the text as well as a particular set of extratextual, socio-historically specific codes. That is to say, in literature as in daily life, one does not simply *observe* disability; one *knows* it.

A literary text need not rely on the creation of visual images in order to produce disability that is simultaneously "real" and meaningful. In *The Monster*, Crane leaves Henry's post-injury face largely undescribed. Instead of detailing the particular post-burn contours of Henry's face, Crane offers only figural gestures that border on the impossible—one wonders, for example, in

what regard Henry can be said to have “no face.”²⁹ These vague descriptions seem to operate as anti-details—by frustrating the reader’s ability to perceive, descriptions of Henry’s “no face” invite the reader to complete the image him- or herself. If the reader *sees* Henry’s disfigurement at all, he or she can only do so by filling in the empty space of “no face” with details culled from a mental repository of disability imagery. The reader-supplied details generate affect because they are mediated by their relationship to disability *per se* through an act of cognition separate from and preceding the experience of sensation.³⁰ This phenomenon helps explain Jonathan Tadashi Naito’s curious claim that Crane uses “vivid and disquieting imagery...to describe Henry Johnson” when no such images, at least not “vivid” ones, are to be found (36). In the absence of specific details, however, the qualities of the social interactions that feature Henry either as a participant or an object—when he visits the Farraguts in Watermelon Alley or when various town officials confront Trescott concerning Henry and his care, respectively—inform the reader that Henry is disabled. A word or phrase that denotes disability does not create affect; literary disability, affective or not, is produced by an act of interpretation that articulates an object of sensory observation, like a somatic or cognitive characteristic, with the master category of disability. By divorcing Henry’s disability from a description of his material body and attaching it to social attitudes and interactions, *The Monster* presents an argument that disability is a transcendent product of meaning, not just the immanent sensation that erupts when certain

²⁹ Surely he has a face, although the phrase suggests that his face likely possesses less than all of the qualities or characteristics that one would presume to find in a normative face. Like the judge’s pronouncement of Henry’s death, descriptions of Henry as faceless are only figures that reinforce his socio-political effacement.

³⁰ The novella seems to lampoon the affective capacity of Henry’s disfigurement in its representations of the melodramatic fear he inspires first in the Williamses, his initial custodians, and then the Farraguts, the family of the woman he has been courting. When Henry arrives in Watermelon Alley to invite Bella Farragut to a dance, for example, Crane writes:

then occurred something that resembled the effect of the upheaval of the earth’s surface. The old woman [Bella’s mother, Mrs. Farragut] hurled herself backward with a dreadful cry. Young Sim had been perched gracefully on a railing. At sight of the monster he simply fell over it to the ground. Bella, blubbing, and with her hair suddenly and mysteriously disheveled, was crawling on her hands and knees fearsomely up the steps. (183)

bodies encounter other bodies. In this way, the novella illustrates an important strategy by which American literary realism and naturalism produce and impart meaning to disability. I call this semic and semantic process the *disability effect*.

The disability effect proceeds in two stages: first, the text disables a character through an ostensible act of description, and second, the text embeds that description in a combination of semiotic, syntactic, and semantic networks that convert those descriptions to narrative functions. In the first step, a word or phrase that ostensibly describes a physical or cognitive impairment—what I call a *disabling detail*—disrupts the semiotic chain by evoking an essentialist concept of disability that seems to precede discursive entanglements. Disabling details appear either as descriptions of observable somatic or cognitive characteristics, a first order technique of representation that converts the ostensibly material to the textually figurative, or in networks of metonymic signs or figures, a second order system of signification that foregrounds a state of unfitness through the combined effects of asymptotic references to particular impairments. Each technique causes the detail to fibrillate between the concrete and the figural, a semantic instability that textualizes the material-semiotic nature of disability itself.

In the case of first order disabling details, those apparent descriptions of observable sensorial objects, the disability effect proceeds according to the inverse of Barthes' reality effect. In his critique of realist aesthetics, Barthes claims that a "reality effect" occurs not because the "concrete detail" in a realist text denotes a *thing itself*, but because it connotes *realism itself* by emptying the sign of the signified ("The Reality Effect" 147). In "The Reality Effect," Barthes critiques realism for its "intention to degrade the sign's tripartite nature in order to make notation the pure encounter of an object and its expression" ("The Reality Effect" 147), but the direct description of an impairment has never been a mere representation of an observable trait or

characteristic but has always invoked the extraliterary concept of disability itself, a conceptual object no less real for being immaterial. Barthes suggests that concrete details deny “meaning” because they supposedly embody “being”—the realness of the detail sets it apart from meaning because it does not *signify* but simply *is* (Barthes, “The Reality Effect” 146). Notations of disability collapse this supposed binary, demonstrating how disability can conflate being and meaning. The disability effect animates the disabling detail both as a material fact of being and as a textual figure that always signifies, showcasing the disabling detail’s ability to function recursively in a system of conventions at the same time that it seems to embody material truths about the body. The invocation of the category of disability through a single linguistic sign summons an ancillary network of beliefs, practices, objects, qualities, characteristics, and symptoms to bear on the representation. Representations of disability as mere somatic or cognitive characteristics always fail to capture disability subjectivities because, as a political material-semiotic construct, disability “has never been reducible to [a] transparent observation of the literal” (Schweik 225). Even as the disabling detail calls attention to itself as a figure—a meaning making index of the character’s unfitness which prompts dramatic action—it preserves a sense of its own material truth by appearing as a piece of the real. These details do not produce affect, meaning a bodily feeling triggered by sensation (Jameson, *Antinomies* 32), or at least affect is not all they produce. Disabling details produce the concepts affiliated with particular objects because they are always structured to signify; their *raison d’être* is to *mean something*.

As a *figure*, not a mimetic description, the disabling detail paradoxically evacuates the sign of its signifier and resonates as pure *signified* which then exerts material, agentic force. A literary figure, according to Tsvetan Todorov, is a “particular disposition of language” that “renders [discourse] perceptible” by focusing readerly attention “on the word [thereby] giving

language a value of its own”; it is “what can be described, what is institutionalized” as being describable in a text as opposed to what is unremarkably utilitarian (38–9). “To call the ship ‘ship,’” Todorov explains, “is merely to utilize language as a mediator of signification, thereby killing both object and the word,” while “To call the ship ‘sail’ is to fix our attention on the word” (38). Descriptions of disability, however, operate in an inverse manner. Mere descriptions of benign somatic or cognitive variations always signify the master category of disability—a concept that subsumes the capacity for individuation that specific, idiosyncratic traits possess.

A goal of any disability semiotics should be to break open representations of nonnormative embodiments and trace the operations of a multitude of signifying systems that converge to produce disability as a concept. While semantic indeterminacy at the semiotic level often appears as an argument against the stability of meaning, in the case of “disability” word-level indeterminacy allows the term to aggregate a range of contradictory attitudes, beliefs, and practices as well as the somatic or cognitive features to which it presumably refers. This capacious indeterminacy of disability allows it to be used concurrently as a marker of social disqualification and to be repurposed as an affirmative label for particular cultural works and practices that originate in the disability community. According to the same logic, words that mark specific disabilities do not necessarily sharpen or specify meaning or foreclose ambiguous interpretation, for those words bring with them the range of associations that “disability” makes available. Terms strongly affiliated with disability always mean more than the embodied characteristics to which they ostensibly refer. Amputation, for example (as well as even more specific nomenclatures such as “upper ex” or “lower ex” amputation, as well as the distinctions “congenital” or “acquired”), not only refers to a particular somatic feature of a subject, but also

always refers to the subject's state of being disabled. To call the limp a limp is always to call it, and the person who does the limping, something more.

Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) opens with an illustration of the first type of disabling detail, one that seemingly represents somatic or cognitive characteristics as mere legible objects of perception but deploys them as meaning-laden figures. Like *The Monster*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* draws disability and race into critical conversation, but unlike Crane's novella, which enfold race into disability to register a broad critique of social forms of oppression, Lee's novel uses disability as a metaphorical frame for a focused critique of racial injustice. The novel opens with Scout Finch's reminiscence of her brother Jem's broken arm, and it concludes with Scout narrating the injury and events surrounding it in a way that emphasizes its metaphorical freight. The opening description of Jem's once-broken arm, the bare facts of its new angles and unexpected parallels, foreshadows the profound subjective transformations that the novel dramatizes. Scout's initial description of Jem's arm emphasizes particular visible details: "His left arm was somewhat shorter than his right; when he stood or walked, the back of his hand was at right angles to his body, his thumb parallel to his thigh" (3). Scout embeds this description in an analysis of Jem's experience of disability, framing his asymmetry and the non-normative angle of his hand as benign variations because they do not curtail his ability to "pass and punt" (3). Scout discloses that Jem remains occasionally "self-conscious about his injury," suggesting that his difference is not as benign as she would have the reader believe and that impairment is never simply a matter of physical or mental capacity but always also social. In this case, the disabling details are framed as re-presentations of a concrete signified—Jem's injured arm—ostensibly devoid of meaning (they have no effect), yet Scout's analysis, which on the

surface attempts to empty the injury of significance, affirms the description not as a visual representation but as a signifying system.

The final four chapters reveal that Jem's broken arm embodies both the deformation of justice in a racist, segregated culture, and the disfiguring effects that injustice inscribes in the subjectivities it produces. The last chapters narrate Bob Ewell's attempted murder of the Finch children as an act of revenge against the children's father, Atticus Finch, who has provided legal defense for Tom Robinson, a black male falsely accused (but still convicted) of raping Ewell's daughter.³¹ Ambushing the children one night as they walk home from the school's carnival—where, not coincidentally, Scout has been conscripted into dressing as a piece of ham to celebrate the agricultural productivity of the town—Ewell breaks Jem's arm before he is confronted by Arthur "Boo" Radley, the children's secretive and reportedly monstrous neighbor. Radley kills Ewell, saves the children, and safely returns them to their homes. Although the sheriff and Finch presume Radley would be acquitted if his acts were known and he went to public trial, they agree to represent Ewell's death as a self-inflicted accident in order to save the purposefully reticent Radley from the unwanted attention that a public declaration of his heroism would generate. Finch's complicity in this act of deception destabilizes the ethical base from which he has acted throughout the novel, and his transformation does not indict him as outside the law but indicts the law as too blunt an instrument for the protection of rights in the early 20th century South. As the Finches learn that the letter of the law does not always ensure a just outcome, Jem's broken arm becomes an embodied metaphor of the deformations of justice that the novel dramatizes, including the race-based conviction of the innocent Robinson; Ewell's dissatisfaction with the

³¹ Atticus Finch is a contemporary double of Dr. Trescott—both characters stage professional interventions (legal and medical) on behalf of black members of their community that generate negative consequences for themselves. While Crane allows his narrative to generate drama through an ambivalent representation of the contradictory opinions concerning Trescott's medical judgment and the value of Henry's post-injury life, Lee unambiguously depicts Atticus as acting justly in an unjust world.

fraudulent outcome of the trial even though he and his daughter are technically vindicated; Robinson's death during an attempted prison break; and the sheriff and Finch's cover up of Radley's involvement in Ewell's death.

Second order disabling details rely upon a network of metonymic signs that evokes disability as an unfit state of being through the intense accumulation of reference. In the absence of specific descriptions of somatic or cognitive characteristics commonly understood as impairments, networks of non-normative details—"the disposition of symbols and motifs, the overall narrative or dramatic perspective, [and] the constitution and reversals of plot structure" are some examples (Quayson 15)—can brand a character with a general label of unfitnes associated with disability. In *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013), Fredric Jameson theorizes the affective capacity of accumulated details, turning his attention to textual assemblages of so-called concrete details, arguing that profuse description calls attention to itself as literary language and, thus, possesses expressive capacity beyond description itself. Citing the "the enormous lists and catalogues" in Émile Zola's fiction, Jameson argues that these descriptions create, "a tremendous fermenting and bubbling pullulation in which the simplicity of words and names is unsettled," "the gap between words and things is heightened," and meaning is suspend or deferred (*Antinomies* 54). Instead of finding this phenomenon in figures, though, Jameson locates it in the relative intensities of banal "mediator[s] of signification," the less obviously meaningful details, the ships called ships that Todorov dismisses. For Jameson, the meaningfulness of details in contemporary stories makes quotidian descriptions resemble "Barthes' *punctum* more than they do his *studium*" (*Antinomies* 23), a convention emphasizing cognition over sensation that turns almost all noise into signal. Significant in their extensive

interest in signification, these non-symbols become expressive through their “unity and density” within a given text (*Antinomies* 23).

The varied meanings that attend networks of such second order disabling produce overdetermined disability ecologies. While no particular detail may directly reference a concrete somatic or cognitive impairment, the array of differences in such a network achieves an ontologically realist disability that the narrative can deploy for figurative, expressive purposes. Jameson defines “ontological realism” as a “truly immanent kind of immanence” that recognizes “meaning...in all its [textual] objects and details, all its facts, all its events” (*Antinomies* 211).³² In the ontologically realist text, transcendence and immanence comingle “to the point at which we can no longer tell them apart or worry about the distinction” (*Antinomies* 211). Like Barthes, Jameson critiques these texts for the presumption of immanence in objects or events, such as modern technologies or financial crises, “which have to be explained in order to come into visible existence as temporal phenomena,” but continue to be perceived as immanent in the absence of explanation (*Antinomies* 211).³³ Disability deserves to be placed in this category as well—never contained by the signs that represent it, always more than the textual network that attempts to invoke it—yet a network of signs in a literary text is enough to reify a concept of disability rooted in the medical model that renders natural what is wholly contingent.

³² Grounded in Barthes’ assertion in “The Reality Effect” that meaning and existence can never be coextensive in modern literature, Jameson codifies the aesthetic possibilities of early 20th century realist literature in a matrix of relationships not between form and content—the fused poles of both pre-Modern realism and New Criticism—but between transcendence and immanence (Jameson 210). Transcendence, for Jameson, is pure “meaning,” while “immanence” is existence, bare life itself (211). Jameson understands Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life” to mean a state of being stripped of any “narcissism of the other,” meaning the “‘healthy’ dose of narcissism” that keeps the biological individual “interested in life, in survival, in the satisfaction of its desires and even of its whims” (Jameson 91–2). Thus, that which is immanent (for Jameson) is that which exists independently of any capacity or desire to flourish, as opposed to Aristotle’s eudaimonia which presumes a “life determined by activity” (16).

³³ As he attempts to prise immanence from transcendence, Jameson helpfully reminds us—as indeed we must be reminded four decades after the cultural turn—that “what is, whether in the text or the life world, is not always meaningful” and “what is meaningful is not always there as an existent, in the world” (*Antinomies* 211).

Although first order disabling details rely on word-level semantic indeterminacy to collate a variety of disabling concepts and ideas, second level details may connect across a range of linguistic and narrative units in a text. Meaning in literary texts is created by the interplay of heterogeneous units of various sizes throughout the entire text, not just word- and sentence-level linguistic functions, and this extended system of signification can mark characters as disabled, render disability meaningful, and transform characters into embodied metaphors. As Tsvetan Todorov writes:

in literature the sentences are once again integrated into utterances and the utterances, in their turn, are integrated into units of larger dimensions, until we reach the work as a whole. The meaning of a monologue or of a description can be grasped and verified by its relations with the other elements of the work: the characterization of a hero, the preparation of a reversal or suspension in the plot.

(24)

While Todorov carefully opposes this function of literary discourse to acts of extraliterary interpretation, literary disability again collapses this distinction (and one might argue that such a distinction is wholly untenable). Disability ecology insists that disability is always the product of an aggregation of heterogeneous actors in a specific socio-historic context; therefore, disability subjectivity, as a material-semiotic effect, and literary disability, as an effect of textual relationships, demonstrate a homologous structure. Both depend upon interpretation, not bare perception, to produce disability.

The opening chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird* also offers an illustration of these second-order disabling details at work. The physical description of Boo Radley does not use details closely tied to particular impairments; instead, the gossip-based details work together to suggest

not a specific impairment but his general unfitness. Scout recounts second-hand tales of Boo that depict him as sociopathic, including his youthful troublemaking “with the wrong crowd,” his subsequent *de facto* house arrest by his father-warden, whom Boo eventually assaults with a pair of scissors, and his rumored nocturnal voyeurism. Dill and Jem offer speculative physical descriptions that transform his asociality into embodied evolutionary regression and monstrous, primitive animality: Boo has “blood-stained hands” from eating animals raw, he drags one leg and leaves tracks in yards when he peeps through windows, he scratches at screen doors, and he has “a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time” (11–4). Introduced through this constellation of second-hand details and focalized through six-year-old Scout’s perspective, Boo seems disabled and monstrously so, a creature beyond the boundaries of the socio-political system of Maycomb, Alabama. These descriptions make his isolation and ostracization seem justified, and Lee relies upon this in order to undercut it in the novel’s climactic conclusion. These descriptions contrast with Scout’s physical description of Boo when she is able to observe him closely after he has saved Jem and her from Ewell. Looking through eyes teary with recognition, Scout sees Boo’s “sickly white hands that had never seen the sun,” and she sees that “his face was as white as his hands... His cheeks were thin to hollowness; his mouth was wide; there were shallow, almost delicate indentations at his temples, and his gray eyes were so colorless I thought he was blind. His hair was dead and thin” (Lee 310). Although this description serves as a corrective to the monstrous animality she relates in the opening chapter, Scout’s ostensibly “real” description equally depends upon metaphor as it frames Boo’s physical characteristics as the outcome of his social isolation, not its cause. This description is crucial to the novel’s central metaphor: Boo Radley, like the wrongly convicted Tom Robinson, is a mockingbird, a creature that, according

to the novel, does no harm but is punished by a sinful society that sees harmlessness as an invitation to violence and domination.

In the second step of the disability effect, the text embeds the disabling detail in a system of references that transforms what is ostensibly description into narratological function. The disabling detail does not, as Barthes would suggest, foreclose the development of “narrative structure itself” (“The Reality Effect” 147), but demonstrates the detail’s capacity to operate as a function, for literary representations of disability always anticipate corollary narrative features elsewhere in the text. By activating common assumptions about the meaningfulness of disability—as opposed to understanding disability as a sign of benign human variation that simply *is*—the disabling detail “plants itself like a seed that promises a later flowering” (Barthes, “Structural Analysis” 244), becoming a narratological function. That is to say, the disability effect frames the disabling detail as a *material fact that also always signifies*, enabling the detail to perform as a narratological function: when disability appears in a literary text, the reader can expect it to operate causally elsewhere. Just like Chekhov’s famous rifle but unlike the unremarkable physical descriptions of normative characters, disability always matters to the plot.

In its regard for the semiotic and semantic functions of disabling details, the disability effect works at cross purposes with differential reading, my term for a current trend in literary disability scholarship that claims to restore the figural functions of disability in narratives while it acknowledges the lived experience of disability subjectivities. Differential reading depends on textual figures that reference symptoms, but this practice never acknowledges that symptoms themselves are textual. The differential method relies upon an audience literate in disability signs for these figures to perform aesthetic and extra-aesthetic work, and it treats these signs as stable, immanent products of nature alone, not contingent, meaningful objects of discourse. For

example, Michael Bérubé presents the lived experience of disability denuded of its overdetermined relationship to signs and meanings, as if its characteristics, criteria, or symptoms could stand apart from discursive formations. While Bérubé argues that his work restores the “figural” to the literary interpretation of disability by reading for the presence of disability symptomology—for example, he holds that the opening section of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is productively disabled because the telling of the story is focalized through the neurological difference of Benjy Compson (“Narrative and Intellectual Disability” 470)—the disability effect acknowledges medical symptomology as only one part of the figural system that inflects disability subjectivities. Despite foregrounding the supposedly objective conditions of particular disabilities, what differential reading proposes as empirical actually operates as the disabling mediation of language. Although the practice of differential reading promises a supposed reclamation of the lived experience of disability, such readings reanimate foundational assumptions about disability common to an American realist aesthetic largely based in sign systems. By reading the American realist aesthetic and the fiction that performs it through the lens of the disability effect, one sees how disabling details lay bare antithetical tensions that mystify disability in the name of the real.

American Literature Gets “Real” about Disability

American literary realism offers a hostile environment for the production of knowledge about disability subjectivities.³⁴ Codified in the late 19th century, American literary realism

³⁴ Ample scholarship has troubled any notion of “realism” as a stable set of aesthetic conventions. This investigation continues in the tradition of scholars of American realism such as June Howard, Amy Kaplan, and Michael Davitt Bell, who reject the premise that realist literature reflects social conditions in favor of viewing it as coexisting among a network of social practices and productions (Bell 3). In *The Problem of American Realism* (1993), for example, Bell writes that “realism” has “been used by generations of American fiction writers, from the 1880s to the present, to describe what they thought they were doing—or at least what they wished others to think they were

turned to representations of marginalized identities, including disability, in an effort to “ensure that social difference can be ultimately effaced by a vision of common humanity, which mirrors the readers' own commonplace, or everyday life” (Kaplan 21). David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder argue that authors appropriate disability in order to “counter...scientific or truth-telling discourses” (*Prosthesis 2*), and in late 19th century U.S. fiction, disability is often used as a tool to critique the pressures exerted on normative subjects by the profound transformation of the national economy from an agrarian model organized by feudal relations to an industrial model based upon wage labor under capitalism.³⁵ Realist narratives premised on this principle typically chronicle nondisabled characters that undergo profoundly disabling changes in subjectivity; these narratives often figure the loss of individuality by illustrating a system of binding socio-economic ties that converts an otherwise disembodied subject into a dependent, embodied one. This deformation occurs not only in the representation of the social ties of given characters but also, as Lennard J. Davis argues, in the increased embodiment of their differences (97). Authors who consciously operated within realist and naturalist traditions offer disabled characters that make meaning beyond the disability effect.

If American literary realism inaugurates a tradition of using disability representations as symbols to critique tensions between emergent forms of production and normative subjectivity, subsequent aesthetic literary movements in the twentieth century draw upon it both thematically and aesthetically. During a long 20th century of American literature,³⁶ novelistic fiction maintains

doing” (Bell 4). Regardless of any claims to mimetic accuracy, then, realism as a term remains salient both for the historical roles attributed to it and for the work done expressly in its name. Like Bell, I read authors who apply the term realism or naturalism to their own work.

³⁵ To say that twentieth century American fiction takes up economic issues is simply to reproduce a dominant pillar of postwar criticism, yet to refract this view through the lens of disability theory reveals new facets of the literary engagement with economics.

³⁶ With all due respect to Eric Hobsbawm, whose “short twentieth century” ranges from the beginning of World War I in 1914 until the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the course of literary history in the twentieth century U.S. as

a consistent use of disability representations across a range of genres with divergent aesthetic projects.³⁷ The persistence of disability as a symbol of difference and an agent of critique in texts as aesthetically distinct as William Dean Howell's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) and David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System* (1986), for example, suggests a continuity in the ideology of ability beginning with disability's figural codification in American realist novels through its supposed emancipation in the postmodern fiction of the late 20th century. Given that any culture's idea of normalcy changes over time (Oliver and Barnes 19), the semic obduracy of the disabled character seems even more puzzling. Despite social and historical differences in the dominant concept of disability, these representations articulate an anxiety about dependence, a condition alternately viewed as a subjective state antithetical to the fundamental values of American identity and as a social location produced by the rampant proletarianization of U.S. labor.

American literary realism is the seedbed from which this strange, amaranthine flower of literary disability emerges. The institutionalization of American literary realism and its near-hegemony in late 19th and early 20th century novelistic fiction can be attributed in large part to the critical and creative work of William Dean Howells. The scope of Howells's influence requires no rehearsal, yet the particulars of his aesthetic project, what Amy Kaplan calls the "aesthetic of the common" (13), deserve further consideration especially where they concern the deployment of marginalized identities for figural, expressive purposes. Using his pulpits as editor of *Atlantic*

it relates to disability and political economy cannot be made fully legible without accounting for events that both precede and succeed the events that bound his formulation.

³⁷ I do not intend the "long twentieth century" to appear as a symptom of a typical ethnocentric worldview. No doubt Hobsbawm is justified in selecting World War I and the end of the Soviet Union as watershed moments in world history. However, changes in U.S. cultural productions, specifically fiction, cannot be said to be dependent on these events alone. Certainly American Modernism partially crawled from the trenches in Europe, but it also rose in resistance to the dominance of literary realism. Likewise, and perhaps to its detriment if one were to believe Horace Engdahl, U.S. fiction has not yet forged significant aesthetic movements in response to the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Monthly and editorial writer for *Harper's Monthly*, Howells establishes the inclusion of marginalized identities as a “grave duty” of realist authors (Trachtenberg 185). These authors’ literary productions, Howells opines, ought to dramatize the intersections of characters of various identity categories in order to illustrate their common, shared American identity that eclipses individual differences and makes them meaningless (Kaplan 21). To represent this common American denominator, Howells demands that authors “picture [reality] in the most exact terms possible, with an absolute and clear sense of proportion...for [the] benefit of people who have no true use of their eyes” (qtd. in Trachtenberg 185–6). This proposition contains obvious contradictions—as well as ableist ideology—not least the friction between *representing* an *unmediated* reality while maintaining a “sense of proportion.” By conflating the representation of sense experience (“picture in the most exact terms possible”) with aesthetics (“proportion”), Howells articulates the foundational antagonism from which realism emerges: it is an epistemological claim for truth masked as an aesthetic ideal (Jameson, *Antinomies* 5–6).

The aesthetic of the common attempts its democratic boosterism through paradox: for the eventual revelation of a character’s inherent, transcendent, and common American subjectivity to render its immanent individual differences as *meaningless*, those differences first must appear to be *meaningful*. That is, the characters must first possess and demonstrate qualities or characteristics easily recognizable as aberrant or abnormal if they are to undergo a process of normalization. Howells’s aesthetic draws upon easily recognizable codes of difference, those stigmatized traits attached to taboo, as the source material for these contingent, delible characteristics and qualities (Trachtenberg 184).³⁸ The use of such characteristics to embody a common humanity or cultural average can only function when readers understand specific details

³⁸ Lawrence Buell claims that this turn by self-described realists to marginalized identities arose from a “hypersensitivity to taboo,” which led to the authors’ use of “‘forbidden’ terrain” to distinguish the serious American novel from the popular romance (Buell 331).

as textual objects brimming with meaning, not as perceivable but otherwise meaningless characteristics of being. By subordinating characteristics and qualities that individuate identity categories in the pursuit of commonality, realist representations most often elide the lived experience and material conditions of non-normative identity categories, effectively erasing alternative or oppositional modes of being and denying non-normative identities the capacity for knowledge production. “To call oneself a realist” in the Howellsian sense, Amy Kaplan argues, “means to make a claim not only for the cognitive value of fiction but for one’s own cultural authority both to possess and to dispense access to the real” (12). In this context, American realist texts and their authors become both producers of and gatekeepers to knowledge about normalcy by first showcasing and then negating difference. For a realist, the literary value of difference is its social valuelessness.

Yet the extra-literary obduracy of disability due to its overdetermined, networked origin causes representational gestures such as Howells’s, even if well meant, to reify differences that are always in part ephemeral and semiotic effects. Realist aesthetics typically foregrounds disability’s symbolic difference without offering an accurate representation of disability subjectivities, while a character’s somatic or cognitive differences never fully conform to the idealized average that the fiction celebrates. Notations of somatic and cognitive differences persist as a residue despite whatever enfolding into normalcy the texts describe for the characters marked by them. Thus, texts cut from this cloth effect a simultaneous exclusion through inclusion: disability is the difference that remains different. Framing disability as an exemplary-yet-inassimilable characteristic of authentic life, the conventions of American realist fiction convert the somatic and cognitive differences of disabled characters into tokens of the real itself. However, the very irreducibility of disability in realist novels, meaning its resistance to enfolding

or normalization, provides a foundation for the production of knowledge about disability subjectivities that realism strips from other identity categories.

As a luminary in American literature, Howells exerted tremendous influence on aspiring realist authors both aesthetically and professionally, and he acted as a vector in the dissemination of a technique of disability representation that continues to produce effects in contemporary American fiction and the material lives affected by it. His editorials institutionalized the aesthetic conventions against which new novels were judged, and his personal influence connected would-be writers with publishers and could raise or lower the fortunes of already established novelists, making him the powerful index case in the spread of ontological realist disability. By reading Howells' uses of disability in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) alongside those in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and Stephen Crane's *The Monster* (1898), two novels by authors he championed, one can begin to trace the range of outcomes that the disability effect makes possible.

Although each novel uses disability as an instrument to critique normative culture, each novel focuses on distinct objects that cause disability to appear in markedly different incarnations. In these particular novels by Howells and Chesnutt, first order disabling details produce and reproduce truth-effects about disability as pathology through the abruption of the signifying chain, and they generate meaning through the avoidance of mimetic description and the activation of tropes of difference that seem to conjure a *gestalt* of disability. These novels, however, deploy disability for very different ends—Howells sees disability as the metaphorical corrective for untrammelled capitalist accumulation, while Chesnutt sees disability as the deformed product of capitalist logic itself. While Howells represents the disabled Berthold Lindau as the embodied socialist antithesis to Mr. Dryfoos, a new-moneyed capitalist whose

attempts to fit into New York society dramatize the tension between his ideology of economic rationality and the ideology of inherent taste known as “old money,” Chesnutt uses Captain George McBane, a upwardly mobile member of the “poor-white class” who has one eye, to embody the deformations caused by strict adherence to market forces. Chesnutt also uses second order disabling details to characterize Dr. William Miller, a skilled black physician who understands racial discrimination as a form of disability, a narrative development that turns attention to the non-material aspects of disability. As we have seen, Stephen Crane’s novella provides a counterpoint by emphasizing the social relationships in a disability ecology and, thus, provides a radical representation that reserves space for Henry’s humanity at the center of a network of dehumanizing discourses. However, *The Monster* also features another disabled character, Judge Hagenthorpe, that demonstrates an alternative use of disabling details that critiques ableist ideology and also produces knowledge about disability subjectivities.

The Ordinary-Extraordinary: Disability as Spectacular Banality in William Dean Howells’

A Hazard of New Fortunes

As an editor and author, Howells worried that popular fiction would create culturally homogenizing consequences particularly due to its audience’s potential to misperceive the flattening effects of typological characterization as homologous expressions of extraliterary life. As a bulwark against this normative future, Howells develops an aesthetic practice that calls for the inclusion of characters hailing from un- or under-represented social locations and for their more mimetic, less typological representation (Kaplan 19). The narrator of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* articulates the latter attitude through a description of Alma Witherspoon, an aspiring artist who rejects the amorous advances of Angus Beaton, her former teacher, in favor of living

and making art alone. The narrator explains that “Like everyone else, [Alma] was not merely a prevailing mood, as people are apt to be in books, but was an irregularly spheroidal character, with surfaces that caught the different lights of circumstance and reflected them” (Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 94). In this and similar passages,³⁹ the narrator attempts to teach the audience to distrust characterizations built upon single, static markers that establish an easily recognizable relation of difference.⁴⁰ Curiously, for an iteration of realist principle, the narrator’s statement also implies that literary characterization is an artificial device, a mediation between the material signified and an audience, that can never fully contain the spheroidal object. At the same time, the narrative makes a case for its own representations as real and truthful. Although Howells extends this practice to the normative characters in the novel, he continues to represent disabled characters, specifically Berthold Lindau, as symbolic types.

Howells’s deployment of disability for aesthetic and political ends activates both the explicit and implicit claims in the narrator’s statement, and the dynamic between these readings—disability as ungovernable materiality and disability as semiotic sign—produces the disability effect. Read against disability in specific, the narrator’s aesthetic statement seems to offer an alternative to the typical use of disabled characters as secondary figures that are defined by a “single stigmatized trait” and “enveloped by the otherness that their disability signals in the text” (Garland-Thomson 11, 10).⁴¹ However, even though disabled characters are meant to disrupt conventional typologies in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the figural power of literary

³⁹ For example, the narrator notably describes Margaret Vance, the philanthropic and pious niece of the society maven Mrs. Horn, as being “like everyone else, a congeries of contradictions and inconsistencies, but obedient to the general expectation of” her social identity (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 228).

⁴⁰ One might say that the narrator’s commentary implies that the signifiers in literary texts never point to material signifieds but to their own conventions, a claim not unlike Barthes’ in “The Reality Effect.” By extension, then, one might suppose that the same holds true for other characters, including those marked by disabling details.

⁴¹ In this assertion, Howells’s narrator anticipates Lennard Davis’s claim that novelistic characters, specifically those in 18th and 19th century fiction, are distinguished by simplistic differences, and he suggests that more complex formulations “undefine” them (Davis 113–4).

disability in the novel rises precisely from its own typological legibility. Berthold Lindau, a German-born veteran of the Union Army whose left hand has been amputated due to a war wound, ultimately serves as a curative figure whose strict moral and ethical influence effects homogenizing changes in the central, normative characters in the novel.⁴²

Steadfastly observant of his anti-capitalist and pro-labor “brincibles,” Lindau has preoccupied a number of critics as a figure that articulates multiple non-normative identity categories, including nationality, ethnicity, and radical politics (Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 291). Almost all critics who write on Lindau comment upon his German heritage, a trait consistently foregrounded by the representation of his speech in dialect,⁴³ and they typically situate him within the burgeoning organized labor movement of the late 19th century, a move in keeping with the circumstances of his death from injuries sustained while demonstrating alongside striking streetcar workers. His nationality and ethnicity so captivate critics that one even tries to use contextual details to uncover a hidden Jewish identity.⁴⁴ Lindau’s disability identity, however, interests few who write on him or the novel.

The critical avoidance of Lindau’s amputation suggests either that disability remains an invisible minority identity category that critics simply do not see or that critics find its symbolic meaning so self-evident that there seems to be no reason to comment on it. Both possibilities reflect an uncritical attitude about disability that propagates a reductive, essentialist view of disability and disability subjectivities. Such critical inattention to Lindau’s disability seems odd due to Howells’s widely known aesthetic as well as the persistent references to Lindau by

⁴² In the article “Who Put the *the* in *the* Novel,” Davis extend this argument to the representation of disability in literary narrative, arguing that the primary role of disabled characters is to offer a cure for the central conflict in the novel, which Davis defines as a disruption in normalcy (Davis 98).

⁴³ Howells also uses regional accents to characterize other figures, including Mrs. Dryfoos’s Midwestern accent and Colonel and Miss Woodburn’s southern Virginian drawl. Not surprisingly, the presumably normative Boston and New York varieties are unmarked.

⁴⁴ See Bauch, Jonathan. “Public German, Private Jew: The Secret Identity of Berthold Lindau in Howells’ *A Hazard of New Fortunes*.” *American Literary Realism*, 41(1), 2008: 14–34.

disability-based epithets like the “old one-handed German” and the “one-handed Dutchman.” For example, Lindau occupies a central position in Cynthia Stretch’s historical analysis of the novel’s juxtaposition of authorial rights to literary representation with the streetcar companies’ denial of workers’ rights to union representation during the 1889 streetcar strike, yet she does not once acknowledge Lindau’s amputation. Leonard Kriegel does reference Lindau’s disability, but only to classify him as a “Realistic Cripple” in his taxonomy of literary disability, a designation by which Kriegel means a character “whose wound is *merely a part* of his overall sense of selfhood” (Kriegel 33, emphasis added). Even if one grants Kriegel’s claim that “the lost hand has little if anything to do with Lindau’s socialist and anarchist views,” his argument, limited to Lindau’s own self-awareness, does not extend to his positionality among other characters or to disability as a literary figure itself, omissions that effectively leave the influence of Lindau’s literary disability underexplored (38).⁴⁵

In light of both Howells’s aesthetic and Kriegel’s classification, Lindau’s amputation *could* be read as a concrete detail that establishes realist verisimilitude: disability increased in public visibility during the decades following the Civil War due to large numbers of veterans who had survived formerly fatal wounds, and the description of Lindau’s hand may simply reflect that change in lived experience. The use of new weapons and ammunition, particularly the Minié ball, radically produced embodied effects that triggered new disability semiotics and politics. The visibility of disability increased exponentially as disabled veterans by the thousands began bringing disability home from the front lines. Reflecting on the “melancholy harvest” of amputated limbs in 1863, Oliver Wendell Holmes writes, “It is not two years since the sight of a person who had lost one of his lower limbs was an infrequent occurrence. Now, alas! there are

⁴⁵I am not sure one should grant Kriegel’s claim. While Lindau does join the Union Army because of his preexisting political ideology, Kriegel’s apparent reliance on chronology denies Lindau’s disability status any subsequent power to inflect his beliefs, effectively erasing disability identity as a valid knowledge-producing standpoint.

few of us who have not a cripple among friends, if not in our own families” (574).⁴⁶ While the Civil War produced an astonishing 600,000 casualties between the Union and Confederate armies, it also produced an almost equal number of wounded veterans who survived, including 130,000 who were ““scarred or disfigured for life”” (U.S. National Library of Medicine; qtd. in Yuan 71). The extent of these injuries can be largely attributed to the Minié ball, a soft cone-shaped lead bullet adopted in 1855 by the U.S. Army to replace solid ball ammunition in field rifles and muskets. The Minié ball caused unprecedented disablement in two ways. First, the Minié ball was a smaller diameter than the standard rifle bore it replaced, which allowed soldiers to reload their weapons more quickly and, therefore, increased opportunities to injure or kill enemy soldiers in greater numbers. Second, the lead Minié ball was softer than a standard ball, so it flattened on impact and dispersed its force across a greater area, causing bones to shatter instead of break and tissue to disintegrate into a pulp that could not be sutured effectively in the field (“The Bullet That Changed History”). This advance in weaponry outpaced advances in field medicine, so medics were forced to perform approximately 60,000 limb amputations, a full third of all field surgeries, to save soldiers from death due to traumatic injury or opportunistic infections (U.S. National Library of Medicine).

Although advances in warfare during the Civil War emphasized the materiality of disability through the mass production of non-normative bodies, the reintegration of disabled soldiers to the home front precipitated a nationalized system of care. The shift from charitable to public support for disabled people, as well as advances in prosthetic technologies, spurred the reconfiguration of disability’s cultural meanings. During Reconstruction, David D. Yuan argues,

⁴⁶ In a striking coincidence, Holmes’s son, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., was an Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court during *Buck v. Bell* 1927, the case that decided in favor of mandatory sterilization programs. In the Court’s opinion, Holmes writes, “It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind” (Holmes, Jr.)

the public believed that it had “an obligation to recuperate the disfigured [veterans] and offer them the opportunity to make themselves presentable” (82). As early as 1862 the Federal government began to address the rampant disablement of Union soldiers, providing disabled veterans with funds for the purchase and fitting of a prosthetic device—\$75 for a lower limb and \$50 for an upper—while the Confederacy soon followed (U.S. National Library of Medicine). A forerunner of the altruistic spirit common to early 20th century Progressivism, this recuperation supposed not only the soldier’s return to pre-war productive capacity, but also advocated what Yuan calls a “nationalist body aesthetics” (72), meaning an aesthetic rehabilitation into an idealized, holistic figure that could symbolize the reunified nation.

Yuan reads Holmes’s “The Human Wheel, Its Spokes and Felloes” (1863) as an articulation of this “nationalist body aesthetics” in its praise of the Palmer leg, described as the perfect prosthetic supplement for a symbolically injured nation (72). The Palmer leg evoked the American myth of self-determination in that its designer, B. Frank Palmer, fabricated the leg due to dissatisfaction with the peg leg that he had used since childhood. Common among European veterans, the peg leg caused a distinct gait that signified disability with every step, but the Palmer leg incorporated an articulated knee that could flex, a technological development that allowed a more normative gait that rendered the disability less visible and afforded the disabled person an opportunity to pass. In its technological difference from the peg leg, Holmes suggests, the Palmer leg not only emblemizes America’s increased independence from the “Old World,” but also allows the user to re-enter polite American society in which “misfortunes of a certain obtrusiveness may be pitied, but are never tolerated under the chandeliers” (578, 574). The Palmer leg was handcrafted, not mass-produced, to resemble a normative biological leg, a distinction in mode of production which Holmes sees as affirming American aesthetic superiority

over its continental rivals. Holmes's claim implies much more than a national interest in pretty, well-made things, as the intertwined history of aesthetics, taste, and ability demonstrate. As Yuan adroitly summarizes, "the grizzled veteran 'stumping around on his peg do[es] not present the image appropriate to a young nation boldly on the rise. ...if America is the efficient, smoothly rolling wheel, then Europe is the splintery, inefficient, old peg" (Yuan 85).

When one does account for Lindau's disability in terms of the intersubjective or the figural, however, one sees that Lindau's amputation becomes an ostensibly democratizing textual feature *because* it is both a piece of a disruptive real and a linguistic sign. Instead of referencing an arbitrary physical characteristic, an otherwise banal signified of somatic difference, the disabling details used to describe Lindau activate conventional assumptions about the category of disability that produce the disability effect. Most immediately, the acts by which Lindau acquires his disability perform symbolic work—Lindau, a German national, volunteers to fight on behalf of the Union because he believes in the emancipation of Southern slaves, so his amputation always appears as a token of his egalitarian principles. More subtly, Howells's novel-wide use of somatic metaphors for capitalist success and the novel's lack of verisimilar description of disability subjectivity create disability effects that establish Lindau as a mustering point for a critique of American culture under industrial capitalism. Lindau's amputation does not descriptively mark him as a realistic depiction or local color; it meaningfully marks him as a Red.

Howells forecloses any reading of Lindau's impairment as a marker of his lived experience by offering second-order disabling details and simplistic, reductive accounts of the material effects that Lindau experiences due to his amputation. The narrator describes Lindau's amputation with words and phrases like "stump," "maimed arm," and "empty sleeve" that either

provide vague images for the reader to elaborate or use metonymies to highlight lack (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 165, 265, 299). Like a sideshow owner, Howells often situates Lindau in common situations in order to defamiliarize banal acts, and these descriptions emphasize the interdependence and intersubjectivity that capitalism elides and disability typically foregrounds. In these scenes, the narrator always superficially describes Lindau as having little or no adaptive capacity with respect to his changed corporeality, yet the semantic power of these disabling details makes these so-called realistic descriptions symbolically meaningful. In Maroni's restaurant, for example, March sees "the overworked waiter cut up [Lindau's] meat and put everything in easy reach of his right hand," a passage that asserts Lindau's dependency on others to feed himself (and after more than twenty years of living as an amputee) as it simultaneously frames him as a recipient of charity for whom even an "overworked waiter" will extend himself (Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 72). Likewise, March's daughter, Bella, performs the same functions for Lindau when he dines with the Marchs, the narrator noting "that the child bravely sat next to his maimed arm at the table, and helped him to dishes he could not reach, and cut up his meat for him" (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 265). Howells compounds Lindau's dependency at the Marchs' dinner when Mrs. March tells her husband, Basil, whom Lindau had tutored in his youth, "the Germans struck so and were so unscrupulously dependent" (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 266).

More absurd than his inability to feed himself, perhaps, Lindau first attempts to greet March with a two-handed handshake, his emotions triggering a dormant yet apparently innate response (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 80). Because the act of shaking hands is a socially elaborated gesture, Lindau's "mechanical" motion reveals itself as another detail meant to emphasize his difference from normative culture and render him extraordinary for symbolic or

thematic effect, for a reader cannot reasonably expect Lindau to have resisted assimilation to his changed body for decades or to have failed so completely to recalibrate his proprioceptive awareness of his changed physiology. The very absence of verisimilar description foregrounds Howells' use of disability as a defamiliarizing signifier of a non-material signified, a referral to the abstract category of unfitness that disability always evokes. In these scenes and many others, the novel presents Lindau's impairment as an index of his dependence, a qualitative feature framed as oppositional to normative values prevalent in industrial American culture, the figurative and literal embodiment both of capitalism's deformative pressure and its cure.

Lindau's supposed incapacities establish a baseline incompetence that inform the narrative's figural use of disability as a manometer to measure the dense relationship between capitalism and the laborer's normative body. Robert McRuer calls this ideological formation "compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 2), and it sets an ideological backdrop against which Lindau rises in stark relief. Howells captures the ambivalent reaction to economic transformation in a pair of descriptions given by Fulkerson, a former newspaper "syndicate man" and publisher of *Every Other Week*, the literary journal that organizes much of the action in the novel. Fulkerson describes a local economy's turn to industrial capitalism as a disaggregating force that results in the citizenry "splitting up into as many different cutthroats as there are *able-bodied citizen*," a state of affairs that effectively bypasses disabled citizens (Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 72, emphasis added). As an alternative model to this atomization, Fulkerson describes Dryfoos's hometown of Moffitt, a natural-gas boomtown in Ohio where the citizens share profits, as exhibiting qualities, "that made you think what a nice kind of world this would be if people ever took hold together, instead of each fellow fighting it out on his own hook and devil take the hindmost" (Howells 72). Granting that he romanticizes the lived reality of life in

Moffit—Dryfoos becomes a Wall Street speculator, after all—Fulkerson suggests that interdependence and intersubjectivity create a superior social and economic system, and the novel associates these qualities with Lindau because, as we have seen, his disabled body compels normative characters into performing interdependent yet charitable acts.⁴⁷

From the beginning of the narrative, Howells establishes a network of metonymic disabling details that establish a context that demands Lindau's disability be understood as an anti-capitalist symbol. In the opening scene of the novel, Fulkerson tries to persuade March to collaborate on a new literary journal, one financially grounded in an egalitarian pay structure that Fulkerson hopes will make contributors feel more like stakeholders able to break "loose from the bondage of publishers" and less like hired labor or commodities (Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 8). Both men generate a series of possible titles that attempt to capture this spirit, quickly discarding each after a single use until March says, "'You might call it *The Lone Hand*.... The whole West would know what you meant'" (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 8). The phrase "lone hand" most prominently refers to a card player whose cards are strong enough to win a trick without assistance from a partner, yet "hand" is also a synecdoche for laborer that when modified by "lone," with its connotations of independence and self-governance, marks the "lone hand" as a proto-neoliberal subject forged from the raw materials of possessive individualism who remains a free agent in an enveloping system of industrial capitalism.⁴⁸ As March assures Fulkerson, the phrase "lone hand" is immediately legible across a variety of social locations, suggesting that the disabled character that it portends will be equally readable, an instantiation of a known type that will do symbolic work in part through the extraliterary

⁴⁷ Worth noting, Lindau rejects economic charity outright, a tendency that perpetually baffles March.

⁴⁸ The relevance of the synecdochal use of "hand" is reinforced when Dryfoos's daughter, Christine, first meets March and "conceived of him as a sort of hand of her father's"; the word takes on another economic signification when Lindau, who March hires to provide literary translations for the journal, "would receive his pay only from March, because he wished to be understood as working for him" (Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 241, 286).

associations triggered by disabling details. Although the journal is finally titled *Every Other Week*, the phrase *The Lone Hand* and its subsequent repetition establish a position from which one is meant to interpret the lone hand of Lindau, especially given that Fulkerson describes Dryfoos, also German-American but a capitalist who appears as Lindau's foil, as someone who "was making money, *hand over hand*" (Howells 75, emphasis added).

Far from presenting Lindau as a common American subject, these disabling details fluctuate between the material and semiotic and fix Lindau as typologically disabled, the very kind of character that Howells fears will homogenize American culture. The instability of disabling details moves to the foreground when March visits Lindau in his working class neighborhood, the narrator offering contrasting descriptions of Lindau's amputation that alternately emphasize its material-semiotic agency. When March first sees Lindau in his bed, the narrator describes Lindau's amputation as if it were an object entirely separate from his body, noting that "the stump of his left arm lay upon the book to keep it open" (Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 167). By casting Lindau's stump as the subject of the sentence, the narrator separates Lindau's subjectivity from the arm, rendering the arm totemic and thereby defamiliarizing the banal act of reading, a technique Howells uses throughout the novel. As Lindau explains that he lives in the neighborhood in order to maintain his connection to marginalized workers, not due to economic necessity, March engages in an act of equivocation that again emphasizes the figural role of Lindau's amputation as a counterpoint to its preceding hypermateriality. March says, "I don't believe there's an American living that could look at that arm of yours and not wish to lend you a hand for the one you gave us all.' March felt this to be a fine turn, and his voice trembled slightly in saying it" (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 171). Premised on Lindau's presumed incapacity, the verbal flourish of which March is so proud

suggests that the relationship between one's physical hand and another's willingness to offer assistance is analogous to the terms in the cunning semantic relationship wrought by March's equivocation. However, the narrator's indirect speech—"March felt this to be a fine turn"—draws attention to the inappropriateness of March's assumption and denies the figural the ability to replace the material, attempting to leave Lindau's arm a bare fact. By narrating March's mistaken assumption regarding the fluidity between Lindau's disability and metaphor, however, the novel affirms disability as an effect of language even as it tries to emphasize its authentic materiality.

Howells makes further use of Lindau's body as a defamiliarizing agent in order to generate a narrative teleology, meaning that Lindau's physical non-normativity forecasts a narrative event in which his difference will figure centrally. In its fulfillment of impending trouble, Lindau's death initiates a series of transformative moments that affirms the importance of cooperation above individual capitalist accumulation. Howells foreshadows Lindau's centrality in the dramatic climax of the novel through Mrs. March, who repeatedly expresses concern that her husband's and son's affiliation with Lindau will lead to trouble of some kind. These premonitions bear fruit when Lindau pickets alongside striking streetcar workers; attacked by policemen, Lindau shields himself from a policeman's club with his left arm, but the blow shatters Lindau's arm, an injury that escalates into a mortal injury. A reader must work hard to miss the symbolism of the policeman battering what Lindau "gave...to [March's] gountry a goodt while ago" to stop slavery, but in the aftermath of the attack, the narrator returns to somatic metaphor in order to drive home the point that institutionalized capitalism fractures the public sphere into antagonistic independent agents (Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 81). Before dying in the hospital, Linda undergoes a further amputation on his left arm, and when

March and Dryfoos discuss it, Dryfoos says that the doctors “had to take the *balance* of [Lindau’s] arm,” again converting Lindau’s arm into an index of his productive value and suggesting that Lindau’s account has been emptied (Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 404, emphasis added).⁴⁹ Too radical in ideology and corporeality for mainstream adoption, Lindau passes out of the novel and by doing so draws the normative main characters into more moderate positions, auguring the novel’s most profound transformations. As the policeman beats Lindau, Conrad Dryfoos, the capitalist’s son, rushes to Lindau’s aid and is killed by an errant bullet. Conrad’s death, not Lindau’s, finally crushes Dryfoos and triggers the change in a normative character that is the all-too-common lot for disabled characters. Although he had demanded Lindau’s removal from the journal staff for having voiced contrary political opinions, a guilt-ridden Dryfoos holds Lindau’s funeral in his home, sells *Every Other Week* to Fulkerson and March at incredibly generous terms, and departs New York for Europe, actions that suggest that Lindau and his “pathetic mutilation” have tempered Dryfoos’ lust for accumulating capital and his fascination with New York society.

As an assemblage of disabling details, Lindau’s non-normative body matters less in the novel as a part of his lived experience and more as a literary figure within which Howells embodies his critique of capitalism and flags for the reader future functions or actions that this detail makes possible. Howells seems to imply Lindau’s symbolic nature by having him supplement his income by posing as a model for artists, his face so evocative that “there isn’t anybody in the Bible that Williams didn’t paint him as. He’s the Law and the Prophets in all his Old Testament pictures, and he’s Joseph, Peter, Judas Iscariot, and the Scribes and Pharisees in the New” (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 95). The figure of an absence that always surfaces as an

⁴⁹ One must presume the secondary amputation causes an infection, for the narrative never makes clear how Lindau happens to die from a broken arm.

active presence in the novel, Lindau's amputated hand functions as a disabling detail in its dual discursivity and resistance to discourse, a doubling suggested in Mrs. March's perspective on Lindau: "Her theory was that his mutilation must not be ignored, but must be kept in mind as a monument" even if to "herself, the thought of his mutilation made her a little faint; she was not without a bewildered resentment of its presence as a sort of oppression" (Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 264, 265). Mrs. March models an all too common, Janus-headed normative perception of disability—in both cases, the disability *means* something while it also produces affective responses in the normatively embodied subjects with whom the disabled person interacts. The disability seems to exist solely to be accounted for by normative others. By embedding Lindau's disabling details in a network of synecdochal figures that commingle bodily signifiers with economic referents, Howells narrows the possible readings of the amputation to the symbolic. Taken as a collection, these notations demonstrate the figural use of disability not as a positive aesthetic resource, but as a convenient instrument with which a network of textual representations can be made strange and a detail can be transformed into a narrative function. Unattached to any semblance of verisimilar action, Lindau's detail cannot connect to a material signified, a fact that forecloses the possibility of its notation indexing the real but instead referring to the entire category of unfitness that marks Lindau's politics as aberrant even if the narrator, or Howells, is ultimately sympathetic to them.

Caught between the Social and the Material: Two Views of Disability in Charles Chesnut's

The Marrow of Tradition

As editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Howells was an early supporter of Charles Chesnut, then a little known fiction writer who, like Howells, hailed from Ohio. The two began a brief

friendship in February 1900 while Howells was drafting the essay “Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt’s Stories” (1900), his first review of Chesnutt’s short fiction (McElrath 474). Despite his recent arrival on the national literary scene, the prolific Chesnutt had already published two volumes of short stories—*The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*—with a prominent publishing house (Houghton, Mifflin, & Co.) as well as a slender biography of Frederick Douglass in 1899 (474). The friendship between “the entirely white ‘Dean of American Letters’” and the “‘not entirely white’ *litterateur*” was, according to Joseph R. McElrath, a “rapprochement relatively uncommon in the Jim Crow Era” (475). Despite McElrath’s optimistic description of a friendship that crossed the color line, Howells still sees Chesnutt’s fiction as aesthetically crossed by race. In the first review, Howells describes Chesnutt’s short fiction as “remarkable above many, above most short stories by people entirely white, and would be worthy of unusual notice if they were not the work of a man not entirely white” (qtd. in McElrath 474). In keeping with Howells’s aesthetic position on difference, the review lauds Chesnutt for displaying a normative literary excellence that eclipses any artistic differences that may have been attributable to his status as an author of mixed race, an attempt to erase the materiality of race while also reproducing a racist logic. For Howells, there exists only one viable subject position that he too generously understands as being classless and raceless, and differences over the representation of race and the “Negro Problem” under the rubric of realism ultimately lead to the authors’ estrangement.

The congenial relationship continued through correspondence until Howells published a less-than-triumphal review of Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) in December of that same year. For Howells, Chesnutt’s attention to race and racism is unsavory and not fit for literary representation. Whereas Howells’ *The Hazard of New Fortunes* attempts through realism

to foster a common American identity, Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) deploys realism to argue that any notion of a democratic public sphere in the wake of chattel slavery is romantic at best. Both novels are based on historical events (for Howells, the 1889 streetcar strike in New York City; for Chesnut, the Wilmington Insurrection of 1898), and both register critiques of the spread of industrialization with special attention paid to the transition from a bifurcated national economy based in part on chattel slavery to one unified under industrial capitalism. While Howells is willing to excuse the material conditions of existence for the lower classes as a temporary stop in what he perceives as an inevitable march toward an equitable future—and, as McElrath points out, to offer reductive accounts of African American identity in his fiction that sit at odds with his editorial promotion of literature written by non-white authors (478)—Chesnut is unwilling to efface the material conditions of African Americans living in the South during Jim Crow in order to advance an egalitarian vision of utopia. To lay bare the truth about the Wilmington Insurrection in that novel, Chesnut foregrounds the inequality among disparate identity communities in a racist, patriarchal, and capitalist culture that makes consensus-building so difficult. For Chesnut's taking a more fully mimetic aesthetic position on race and class, Howells infamously refers to him as "bitter" in the December 1901 review that lead to their parting ways (475). Howells found distasteful and counterproductive Chesnut's acknowledgement of the incommensurability of these racialized subject positions in a *de facto* racist state, and he censures Chesnut's fiction precisely when it asserts that differences *do* matter as material forces. The real, for Howells, is a sweetness forever moving centripetally upward.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ McElrath notes that "Howells made his own benign contribution to the mythology of color thus [in a passage from *A Hazard of New Fortunes*]: 'One of those colored men who soften the trade of janitor in many of the smaller apartment-houses in New York by the *sweetness* of their race, let the Marches in, or, rather, welcomed them to the possession of the premises by the bow with which he acknowledged their permit'" (478, emphasis added).

Read against one another, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and *The Marrow of Tradition* demonstrate the divergent ways in which disability can operate in realism and the multiple, sometimes contradictory outcomes that disabling details can generate even within one text. Both novels deploy networks of characters that hail from a wide variety of social classes and minority identities, with each text granting special importance to disabled characters. Howells embeds Lindau's embodied difference in a network of second-order disabling details to produce a figural disability that critiques the ubiquitous logic of industrial capitalism; alternatively, Chesnutt uses a physically disabled character, Captain George McBane, to demonstrate capitalism's disfiguring teleology. Chesnutt complicates the novel's definition of disability, however, by opposing his disabled white antagonist with a non-disabled black protagonist who nevertheless experiences his racial identity as a form of disability. Chesnutt's articulation of non-white racial identity with disability acknowledges the material-semiotic nature of disability and the cultural roots of oppression that actively disable people who are perceived as having non-normative somatic or cognitive characteristics.

In a repudiation of 19th century pseudoscientific formulations of race, *The Marrow of Tradition* argues that the subordination of Dr. William Miller, an African American physician, is based in disabling social practices, not biological determinism. Chesnutt illustrates the semiotic roots of racism-as-disability in a scene set in a train car as it passes from a state without legalized segregation to one where Jim Crow laws have been recently implemented. Aboard a train traveling from Philadelphia to Wellington, Dr. Miller encounters his mentor, the white Dr. Alvin Burns, who has been summoned to Wellington to care for Dodie Carteret, the gravely ill young son and sole heir of newspaper editor and white supremacist Major Carteret. The doctors sit together as they reacquaint themselves, but as the train enters Virginia where Jim Crow laws

pertain, the conductor forces Miller to relocate from what is now the “White” car to what is now the “Colored” car, a poorly-kept car that Burns himself is barred from entry. As Miller switches cars and sees the “White” sign, the narrator claims that “should a colored person endeavor, for a moment, to lose sight of his *disability*, these staring signs would remind him continually that between him and the rest of mankind not of his own color, there was *by law* a great gulf fixed” (Chesnutt 56, emphasis added). In his reading of this scene, Michael Bérubé argues that *The Marrow of Tradition* “suggests that African-Americans are literally disabled by segregation, prevented from moving freely according to their wishes and from associating with their white peers” (“Race and Modernity” 146). Bérubé is undoubtedly correct that classification produces material effects in embodied experience, meaning that certain spaces open and close to particular identities based upon how they have been perceived and categorized. If pressed further, however, this scene demonstrates the contingency of identity and its concurrent, ambiguous meanings as well as the importance of a given classification system’s continual performance to constitute subjectivities and render them legible.

Such sign systems, the novel argues, not only physically constrain individuals, but also constitute or transform subjectivities themselves. Both the train cars’ and Miller’s *identities* change as they move between semiotic systems: the generic space of the train cars subdivides into specific places that simultaneously include and exclude; likewise, Miller *becomes* a “colored” subject through the conductor’s act of recognition, the agentic force of the sign, and Miller’s mandatory relocation in physical space. The narrator emphasizes the historico-material conditions of this ontological instability early in the chapter, commenting, “that among all varieties of mankind the similarities are vastly more important than the differences. Looking at [Burns and Miller] with the American eye, the differences would perhaps be the more

striking...for the first was white and the second black” (Chesnutt 49). The narrator initially voices a belief in global community that would surely satisfy Howells’s hunger for a common American subject, but the narrator specifies the particular American perspective as being preoccupied with the maintenance of difference. The actions that surround this scene—from segregation to the *coup* to the resulting violence—imply that the chasm between belief and practice, between a utopic vision of what should be (the “similarities” of mankind) and the lived experiences common to American socio-economic culture, is vast and not easily bridged. Taken together, this assemblage of signs, spaces, and acts of recognition operates as a “regime of truth” that privileges the disembodied effects of discourse above embodiment and, therefore, enables certain subjects to prescribe identities while denying other subjects the capacity for self-determination (Foucault 131). By describing the fascination with difference as a national phenomenon, a move that affirms the arbitrariness of Miller’s skin as a signifier, the narrator suggests that identities—African American, disabled, or otherwise—do not emerge from unmediated bodies but are produced by specific acts of classification and their vigilant performance.

The scene demonstrates how this regime enrolls the conductor by making his self-preservation contingent on his performance of segregation. The train conductor only segregates Miller, who can pass for white, because Captain George McBane, a fellow passenger on the train, identifies Miller as African American in the absence of any visible evidence. The conductor explains to Miller and Burns, “I have already come near losing my place” for failing to enforce the law, but now he “can take no more such chances, since [he has] a family to think about” (Chesnutt 54). Yet even his apparent sympathy and reluctant complicity do not make him immune to the seductive thrill of exercising his limited power (54). Despite professing his

“dislike to interfere,” the conductor becomes “calmly conscious of his power” and “could scarcely restrain an amused smile” as he classifies and compartmentalizes Miller’s body (55). Chesnutt’s representation of disability in this instance seems to deconstruct the disability effect by dramatizing how the material realities of race and disability emerge when subjects perform particular effects of language. By revealing the mechanism by which notations of disability typically perform as coherent signs that are always material and always aberrant, Chesnutt’s scene aboard the train precludes the audience from reading disability as only a matter of embodiment.

Chesnutt’s unconventional representations of disability are rooted in his critique of the racist appropriation of evolutionary theory, and the novel extends this argument by demonstrating that the *coup* staged by bourgeois white supremacists is motivated more by private financial gain than any civic duty to improve stock or steward the dependent. Douglas C. Baynton argues that nineteenth century racist discourse was rooted in the description of African Americans as mentally or physically defective (40), and the novel illustrates this tendency by revealing the expressed motivations of Carteret, who most directly foments the *coup d’état* through his polemical editorials, as rhetorical disguises for his actual material interests. Carteret justifies his belief in the “unfitness of the negro to participate in government” with a series of arguments that begins with the social—“his limited education, his lack of experience”—but concludes with embodied, essential lack—“his criminal tendencies, and more especially...his hopeless mental and physical inferiority to the white race” (Chesnutt 31). The narrator exposes each layer of justification as one peels an onion, finally arriving at a core belief that exists in name alone—there is nothing of substance there on which to justify his claims. Carteret himself reveals the hypocrisy latent in this system of belief when he explains to General Belmont and

McBane, the other two white supremacists that comprise the Big Three who engineer the coup that unseats the democratically elected Fusion government, that ““If we are to tolerate this race of weaklings among us, until they are eliminated by the stress of competition, *it must be upon the terms which we lay down*” (86, emphasis added). Carteret acknowledges that for the supposedly disinterested effects of evolution to occur in this contest, for the fitter race to win out and for white people to maintain their *natural* place, the rules of the competition must be constituted to favor the powerful minority.

Chesnutt further indicts the economic hegemony masked as racist ideology by building a conceptual bridge between Miller’s racist disablement and the physical disability of Captain George McBane. The novel’s superficial antagonist, McBane is a lower-class white supremacist with one eye who is made upwardly mobile by the economic transition in the postbellum South from chattel slavery to capitalism. Unlike African Americans whose physical features are viewed as indexes of their internal inferiority by the white supremacists, McBane’s genetic inferiority—apparent in his manners, dress, and deportment—also takes the form of an acquired disability—the loss of an eye—that embodies his social marginalization by white citizens of good breeding and old money. The narrator focalizes the first description of McBane through Carteret’s perspective in order to emphasize McBane’s status as an unwelcome but useful member of the hegemonic white minority. Carteret notes that McBane’s “strength, energy, and unscrupulousness”—attributes revealed by his “broad shoulders, burly form, square jaw, and heavy chin”—are undermined by the ill-breeding that his disregard for social codes reveals: his hair is “coarse,” his eyebrows are “bushy,” and he pins a “showy diamond” to a shirt-front “stained with tobacco juice” (32). McBane may not have taste, but he has an abundance of ambition only matched by his lack of ethics.

Because Carteret views social class as a product of disinterested genetic fitness, not the result of social processes articulated by economic practice, he sees inherent parallels between “the poor white man” that McBane embodies and the African Americans he scapegoats in his editorials. Carteret muses that, “the example of such men [as McBane] was a strong incentive in his campaign against the negro. It was distasteful enough to rub elbows with an illiterate and vulgar white man of no ancestry,—the risk of similar contact with negroes was to be avoided at any cost” (Chesnutt 87). Carteret couches his class interests in the rhetoric of race in order to “make use of” McBane’s “wealth and energy” (87), revealing that Carteret’s bid for white supremacy derives from his interest in perpetuating an economic system that gives his specific social class advantage, not an interest in protecting the natural rights of white men of various social classes or maintaining an abstract moral order. That is to say, Carteret’s notion of “white supremacy” is really a bid to protect an elect class of supposedly genetically superior white men by curtailing the rights of ownership and participatory democracy of those whose interests would be served best by different socio-economic arrangements. Thus, the novel draws a parallel that imbricates the material-semiotic natures of race and disability in a way that would surely make McBane uneasy—the bourgeois white supremacists invent racialized reasons to disqualify African Americans from full socio-economic inclusion and to enroll poor whites in an effort to protect policies that undermine their own class interests in upward mobility. McBane’s secondary, pathos-laden goal in the novel—admittance to an exclusive and fashionable social club that perpetually rejects him—demonstrates his liminal position as an ascendant poor white man in a socio-economic system propelled by race-based claims to authority that mask the broader effects of class-based discrimination.

Insisting that social practices and institutions actually produce and maintain the social Darwinist system used to justify racist and classist subordination, the novel simultaneously deploys the same truth-effects that it critiques. The novel offers a variety of representations of disability that trade in essentialist assumptions and establish somatic or cognitive disability as a meaningful difference. These representations of disability are situated in a novel-wide constellation of somatic disability notations that collapse the material-semiotic complexity of disability that Chesnutt builds in those passages that describe Miller's awareness of racial identity or link McBane's class status to racial identity. Such moments of representational enfolding trigger the disability effect, elide disability's arbitrary ideological sources, and signify somatic or cognitive difference as a malign otherness.

Jerry Letlow, Carteret's porter, is one of several figures that neutralize the progressive critique of disability subjectivity that Chesnutt develops elsewhere in the novel. An embodied paradigm of the socio-political prejudices that fuel the coup, Jerry's cognitive capacity affirms stereotypical claims of inherent mental and physical inferiority among African Americans that were commonly used to justify racism in the late nineteenth century (Baynton 50). As such, Jerry appears as a cautionary tale for African Americans who would adopt a non-confrontational, conciliatory approach to segregation often attributed to Booker T. Washington's *Atlanta Compromise* (1895).⁵¹ Listening through a crack in an office wall to the first meeting of the Big Three, Jerry cannot "follow it all,—partly because he could not hear everything distinctly, and partly because of certain limitations which nature had placed in the way of Jerry's understanding anything very difficult or abstruse" (Chesnutt 36–7). Unlike the many passages in the narrative

⁵¹ Chesnutt seems to anticipate the major rebuttal to Washington's *Atlanta Compromise*, W.E.B. DuBois's concept of the "talented tenth" (1903), in his depiction of Dr. Miller, but Chesnutt sees no viability in that model, either: the novel ends with Miller's hospital razed and son killed, a symbolic death that signals the untenability of non-activist practice under Jim Crow.

that employ free indirect speech in order to trouble racist and classist assumptions that characters hold, as in the case of Carteret's justification of white supremacy above, Chesnutt uses objective-omniscient narration in this passage to affirm Jerry as inherently inferior. During the coup that takes Jerry's life beneath a white flag of surrender, the narrator again refers to Jerry's mental incapacity, claiming that, "Whatever the limitations of Jerry's mind or character may have been, Jerry had a keen appreciation of the danger to the negroes when they came in contact with the whites" (300). These two references to Jerry's limited mental capacity might seem less a generalization based upon race—Dr. and Mrs. Miller exhibit no signs of mental incapacity, after all—and more a particular characterization of a single figure. However, when one considers that Jerry and his aunt, the nurse Mammy Jane—two characters that Chesnutt marks as unlearned by presenting their speech in dialect—both die in the coup while believing that they will be protected due to their faithful service to white families, one sees not an individual but a familial foolhardiness, a symbolic representation of inherent deficit that critiques African American accommodation and docility as strategies for achieving to an equitable, desegregated society.

"Something of a coward," Jerry marks the standard that Josh Green's powerful body is meant to shatter (Chesnutt 300). Described as a "black giant" with "a reputation for fearlessness," Green assembles the only active resistance to the coup with "the *instinct* of a born commander" (301), displaying a correspondence between his physical capabilities and his ethical ones. When the coup erupts decades after Green has sworn to avenge his father's murder at McBane's hands, Green charges from the burning hospital while his armed comrades are slaughtered around him, his body absorbing pistol fire at point blank range before he finally plunges his bowie knife into McBane's heart, like a modern Odysseus felling a cyclopean terror. In death Green's body—symbolic of heroism, honor, and justice—acts as the weight that inverts

the hierarchy of oppression as it elevates an embodied African American corporality above a subordinate white supremacist identity. Through this juxtaposition, the novel creates a disability effect that foregrounds the materiality of disability at the expense of the semiotic. While celebration of the active over the passive makes political sense in the context of the novel—what justice is possible for second-class citizens who practice obsequiousness when the white nationalist elite suffers no impediment to overthrowing an elected government?—the narrative discourse detrimentally articulates disability with passivity and non-disability with self-directed action, a false binary that implicitly affirms disability itself as justification for socio-political subordination. A decisive and active leader who possesses tremendous physical capacity, Green appears as a clear point of contrast not only to Jerry, whom Green physically drags into the resistance, but also to McBane, whose honorific of “captain” is a “polite fiction” and whose monstrous physical prowess is embodied in his empty eye socket (Chesnutt 109, 301, 35, emphasis added).

Even though the novel demonstrates the material-semiotic nature of disability by linking McBane’s lack of manners and etiquette to a perceived genetic inferiority that justifies his subordination to bourgeois white supremacists, his empty eye socket functions as the defining mark that embodies his interior emotional and psychological states as well as the disfiguring logic of capitalism. Chesnutt uses a constellation of first- and second-order disabling details to overdetermine McBane as a multi-valent symbol of the racist, misogynist South. Marked by his patronymic prefix as the “son of a murderer” or “son that causes death,” McBane announces his difference through his disabling detail, “a single deep-set grey eye,” that embodies his propensity for the monstrous violence that he inflicts on African Americans (Chesnutt 32). A former overseer of a convict-labor outfit who loses his business when the town’s coalition government

outlaws convict labor privateering and a member of the Ku Klux Klan, McBane appears as a gestalt of acquired and congenital disability whose empty eye socket metaphorically embodies his genetic limitations as a “vulgar white man of no ancestry” and a “descendent of the indentured servant and the socially unfit” (87, 86–7). A detail that speaks to his moral and ethical lack, the effect of an injury that persistently recalls McBane’s long history of brutality, the eye socket becomes the primary disabling detail that defines him and organizes other second-order details that render him maladapted and unfit in the egalitarian world that Miller dares to imagine.

The symbolic freight of McBane’s disability is heightened through Jerry’s interpretation and narration of its origin. As Jerry listens to the Big Three discuss their response to the gains of the Fusion government, Jerry describes McBane’s eye and his capacity for looking as symbolic indices of his racial hatred and malevolence: “‘ef dat one-eyed Cap'n McBane got anything to do wid it, w'atever it is, it don' mean no good fer de niggers,—damnation'd be better fer 'em dan dat Cap'n McBane! He looks at a nigger lack he could jes' eat 'im alive’” (Chesnutt 38). To Jerry, McBane is truly monstrous, more vicious than the devil and driven by an insatiable appetite for African American bodies; because the reader knows that Jerry cannot understand anything “abstruse,” his perception of McBane gains added weight and veracity. Fulfilling the expectation that disability necessarily has meaning, Jerry explains that McBane lost an eye while trying to “whip a cullud ‘oman, when he wuz a boy *an’ dat he ain’ never had no use fer niggers sence*” (35, emphasis added). This final clause suggests that the special violence McBane reserves for black men and women, beyond the already repugnant boundary of systemic racism, including the methods he has used against black convicts which “made his contract profitable [but] had not commended themselves to humane people,” originate in his impairment and his affective

response to it (34). McBane enacts heightened violence upon African Americans, Jerry's reasoning implies, as retribution for a disability that he caused himself.⁵²

Further emphasizing the somatic essentialism of his character, McBane always targets individual bodies for retribution while Carteret and Belmont advocate the disruption of social institutions that advocate racial equality in order to maintain their hegemonic authority. During the investigation of the Ochiltree murder, McBane repeatedly claims that justice would only be served if a mob were to "burn the nigger," and suggests that even if the wrongfully imprisoned Sandy could be proven innocent, "[The crime] would justify the white people in burning *any* nigger. The example would be all the more powerful if we got the wrong one" (Chesnutt 182, original emphasis). McBane's fixation on bodies and the affective capacity of physical mutilation demonstrates the extent of his personal hatred based upon race, the limits of his humanity, and his appreciation of the body as the most effective object for propaganda of the deed. When Carteret argues that an African-American run newspaper should be suppressed, for example, McBane says, "the impudent nigger [editor] ought to be horsewhipped and run out of town"; when Carteret suggests that the Big Three should make their disapproval of an editorial publicly known, McBane says, "I say lynch the nigger, break up the press, and burn down the newspaper office"; and when Belmont says that the *Afro-American Banner* will die after white citizens demonstrate "with red shirts and shot guns," McBane says, "And so will the editor!.... I'll see to that" (85, 86, 89). While Carteret and Belmont find McBane's appetites perverse, Chesnutt seems to use McBane to lay bare the reality of racism, for McBane complains, "What's the use of all this hypocrisy, gentlemen? Every last one of us has an axe to grind" (252). With this statement, the novel uses the supposed reality of disability to argue emphatically that

⁵² By rooting McBane's heightened aggression in his disability, Chesnutt participates in a longstanding fiction concerning disability subjectivity and so-called narcissistic injury (Siebers, *Disability Theory* 40).

political justifications for racism merely mask individual, arbitrary dispositions and private desires.

The Marrow of Tradition ultimately offers two conflicting models of disability: disability as a social condition of oppression impressed upon a subject and manifesting inwardly through acceptance and disability as inscribed in the body and manifesting outwardly through narcissistic ego gratification.⁵³ These two models of disability—a social model that establishes disability as socially produced by a dominant culture against an arbitrarily chosen marker and an essentialist model that marks McBane’s impairment as an index of his vicious subjectivity—demonstrate the complex, often contradictory nature of disability formations available even in a single literary text. Chesnutt figures each model with a distinct representational schema, attaching an often rehearsed disabling detail to McBane while purposively articulating the signifier “disability” with the abstract category of unfitness in order to speculate on the social nature of oppression. By implanting notions of race and racism within the category of disability, Chesnutt crips normalcy instead of normalizing difference. However, these dual representations make strange bedfellows. Neither rests quietly while in the presence of the other. Taken together they present the reader with a contradiction that the novel itself never resolves.

Despite devoting a significant portion of the narrative to describing the social nature of oppression and critiquing acts of socio-political subordination based upon arbitrary, racialized traits, the novel advances an ambivalent definition of disability. Chesnutt ultimately uses typological characterizations of other African American characters that rehearse negative intellectual stereotypes about black identity and function as justifications of the subordination of those with non-normative capacity; likewise, the novel uses representations of physical disability

⁵³ I am using acceptance in the manner suggested by Erving Goffman in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). Goffman defines the term as denoting the stigmatized individual’s adoption of normative beliefs about his or her own inferiority because of the stigma.

to mark antagonistic figures that symbolically embody the malign social institutions and attitudes that propagate racism and profit from it. The novel expects us to pity the witless Jerry and Mammy Jane, and it expects us to feel that McBane's death at Green's hands is at least a close approximation of justice. As Chesnutt collapses the social into the material, he produces McBane, a character that is destined for violence due to a volatile combination of disabilities: the genetic inferiority that produces low social class and the wound he receives at the hand of a doubly disqualified adversary in return for his racist savagery. Chesnutt uses McBane's physical disability to externalize his aberrant interiority and mark him as an index of the truth about racism—McBane eschews moral and political justifications for racist practices and acknowledges their origin in individual, self-serving desires. Perhaps tipping Chesnutt's hand when describing McBane's death, the narrator claims, "In works of fiction, such men [as McBane] are sometimes converted. More often, in real life, they do not change their natures until they are converted into dust" (Chesnutt 304). Disabled first at birth by the circumstances of class and later through violence; obdurate; and hungry for power, wealth, and social approval, McBane and his disability speak the truth about the Wellington Insurrection and racism as Chesnutt sees them. But as a textual figure that ultimately elides the semiotic and foregrounds the category of unfitness through his gross physicality, McBane perpetuates stereotypes about disability that, as long as they fail to account for its material-semiotic complexity, will forever be fictive.

"It's about what nobody talks of—much"

Barthes pronounced the entire premise of realism as built upon an impossible foundation: a realist text can never access the real, the things themselves, simply because the signifieds are

never present. Even after the poststructuralist turn, however, certain textual notations and aesthetic techniques persist that seem to reveal a truth even as they produce it, and disabling details number among them. Disabling details, those signs that disable a character in literary texts either through direct reference or metonymic approximation, attempt a mimetic representation always bound to fail, for they refer to *the category of unfitness* itself not to the material conditions of disability subjectivities. When overdetermined interpretation passes as mimetic representation, those details produce the disability effect. Referencing the category of unfitness, the disabling details produces a truth-effect about disability that relies upon discourse, not lived experience, to impart meaning. The disability effect collapses the distinction between the concrete detail and narratological function because literary disability always anticipates corollary functions or meanings in the text. As Colonel Woodburn remarks to Fulkerson in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, “a little reflection will convince any gentleman here that there is always a danger of the exceptional in your system” (Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 309). When that exception is disability and that system is a literary text, the disabling details that assign disability to a character can either work in concert with the system or rupture it. In order to determine which disability effect is operative, one need only follow the signs.

Novels often described as exemplary of realism or naturalism such as William Dean Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), and Stephen Crane’s *The Monster* (1898) provide a convenient archive to test this concept given its claims for verisimilitude and mimesis. Reading Howells’ *A Hazard of New Fortunes* through the disability effect foreground Howells’ reliance on disability to embody the critique of hegemonic industrial capitalism and his brand of realism’s reification of embodied difference as a means to construct a heterogeneous public sphere. Reading Chesnutt’s *The*

Marrow of Tradition in the same manner showcases the emancipatory possibility of disability through a set of contrasting disabled characters. While McBane represents an essentialized disability subject who affirms negative perceptions about people with disabilities and whose actions are biologically determined, Miller represents the social model of disability and acts agentially as part of a larger community. This reading of *The Marrow of Tradition* demonstrates how disabling details both perform subjectification and allow for emancipatory readings of disability, and perhaps this paradoxical nature of the disabling detail can help reveal the system within which literary representation acts upon people with disabilities. Crane's *The Monster* argues that disability, as one form of socio-political marginalization, does not simply occur but is actively produced. Despite Hagenthorpe's declaration, Henry is not Trescott's creation; Henry's disability subjectivity is structured not by biomedical intervention but by the discursive transformation of the social relationships that devalue him.

By following a new set of signs, it is possible to interpret Judge Hagenthorpe's judgment of Henry in a different light. The judge himself speaks from a particular disability subjectivity (whether or not he uses the cane due to the effects of aging on his mobility is never specified), one that has so fully integrated the prosthetic cane into his identity that he relies upon this supplement not just to walk but to reason—he is only his best self when augmented by his prosthetic artifact. The chapter in which the judge implies that Trescott ought to have let Henry die opens with the following: “The old judge had a cane with an ivory head. He could never think at his best until he was leaning slightly on the stick and smoothing the white top with slow movements of his hands. It was also to him a kind of narcotic. If by any chance he mislaid it, he grew at once very irritable” (Crane 167). This best self combines reasoned judgment with social discretion, for he only “risk[s] the truth” in his speech “at the times when his cane was lost”

(167). Thus, the narrative undermines the reliability of the judge's subsequent speech to Trescott. Although the judge "mused deeply, while his hands gently caressed the ivory head of his cane" (168), the men discuss Henry's fate while seated at dinner, and the narrative makes no mention of the cane in the dining room. It seems that Hagenthorpe risks the truth in his opening remarks, "No one wants to advance such ideas, but somehow I think that the poor fellow ought to die," until Trescott dissents, after which "the judge retreated to the cold manner of the bench" for the bulk of his opinion (168).

If Hagenthorpe speaks the truth as he sees it in those initial remarks, it is worth noting that he may well be speaking from a subject position determined in the last instance by disability. In this same chapter we learn that Hagenthorpe is unmarried and has lived with his sister for at least twenty-five years, and we know that this situation is a source of ridicule, even if the judge himself is impervious to its effects. The novel does not resolve the cause of these circumstances, but the accumulation of these details in a single chapter suggest their interrelation, and one supposes that Hagenthorpe's bachelorhood may be a product of his own social marginalization due to disability. When Trescott deflects the judge's attempt at empathy by retorting, "you don't know all about your own boy being saved from death," the narrator promptly frames it, stating, "this was a perfectly childish allusion to the judge's bachelorhood. Trescott knew that the remark was infantile, but he seemed to take desperate delight in it. But it passed the judge completely. It was not his spot" (Crane 169). The earliest use of "spot," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, denotes stigma (1200 CE), so the narrator's explanation may suggest that the stigma—perhaps of bachelorhood due to disability, given the context—does not *originate* with the judge but with those who judge him. This quiet acknowledgement of the intersubjective nature of material-semiotic disability most certainly colors the judge's speech. Perhaps

Hagenthorpe's opinion reflects his own lived experience as a disabled person in a stigmatizing society: even a life marked by professional success and economic security may not always seem worth living.

Like the peony, the cane passes out of view, only to return in the penultimate chapter that narrates the final confrontation between Trescott and the town elders, including Hagenthorpe and John Twelve, the wealthy wholesale grocer. Twelve explains their visit to Trescott, saying, "It's about what nobody talks of—much...It's about Henry Johnson" (Crane 198). As Twelve describes the community's dimmed view of the Trescotts, a view that these elders do not hold, he reveals that these "influential citizens" have decided that it is in Trescott's best financial interest to institutionalize Henry "somewhere up off the valley," and that they are prepared to help arrange this movement. The narrator—with a heavy hand—explains that Trescott "kept his face in the shadow" as he kindly declined the offer. Due to his loyalty to Henry, his unwillingness to devalue or marginalize him due to his disability, Trescott undergoes a symbolic effacement that portends his own socio-economic marginalization in the town. Through this doubled stigmatization, *The Monster* reinforces the material-semiotic nature of disability. The chapter concludes with an image of a silent Judge Hagenthorpe who "was thoughtfully smoothing the polished ivory head of his cane" (200). Keeping his own counsel, the judge's final opinion remains private due to the soothing clarity produced by his prosthetic. The judge's inscrutability tints the proceeding images in the final chapter—the darkened drawing room, the uncut teacake, the portentous teacups.

CHAPTER THREE

Biopolitical Aesthetics and the Crip Gesture of Naturalism

“On an earth made reasonable there is no longer a need for the aesthetic reflection.”

Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno
Dialectic of Enlightenment

Nurturing “Nature”: The Production of Literary Biopolitical Inferiority

In this chapter, I examine works of American literary naturalism through the lens of Critical Disability Studies to explore how they participate in what I call the biopolitical *aesthetics of human disqualification*.⁵⁴ This phrase refers to the range of material processes by which some humans judge, classify, and disqualify other humans from full socio-economic participation based upon aesthetic criteria.⁵⁵ The particular relationships that American literary naturalist texts establish with theories from naturalist philosophy and science in the late-nineteenth century—especially theories such as natural selection and degeneration that supplant religious or providential causality with the materialism of “natural law”—often produce a thematic preoccupation with epistemological and ontological undecidability. This chapter explores two modalities for the textualization of this undecidability: the thematic use of disability representations as embodied metaphors of existential instability and the preoccupation with aesthetics and taste that signals in-built inferiority. Both modalities function as powerful actors in

⁵⁴ In my discussion of the biopolitical aesthetics of human disqualification, I aim to adopt and extend a concept put forth in an unfinished project by Tobin Siebers. The concept’s foundation is his; I am a modern-day Vandover hanging labels on someone else’s walls.

⁵⁵ I draw on Michel Foucault’s concept of disqualification as used in his lecture on January 7, 1976. In this lecture, he describes “disqualified knowledges” as those that are considered “inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated” by normative hegemonic culture (*Power/Knowledge* 82).

the disability ecologies assembled in naturalist fictions. Interest in evolutionary theories and degeneracy among authors of literary naturalism, for example, often leads to disability being framed as a universal, pathological result of one's inability to navigate what Donald Pizer calls the "complex and constantly shifting world" of *fin de siècle* America (*Twentieth-Century* 7). Likewise, the expression of bad taste, understood since at least the eighteenth century in the aesthetic tradition of David Hume as a symptom of physical incapacity, speaks to the in-built inferiority of the subject and justifies his or her socio-political disqualification. The appearance of a dynamic sense of disability in American literary naturalist fiction establishes a proto-disability aesthetics, although the narrow range of disability's uses suggests a counterfeit aesthetics that portends the emergence of what I call *disability kitsch*.

The interpretation of generic effects on disability representation must contend with at least three profound difficulties. First, disability itself is an unstable signifier with a meaning that changes when it appears in different historical contexts even as its figurative uses display a basic thematic coherence over a long twentieth century. Second, speculating that any trope of characterization or textual feature depends upon the logic of a particular genre is a challenge given that borders between genres are so permeable. For example, literary realism and naturalism, the genres implicated in the last chapter and this one, have a particularly complex generic relationship, one marked by an "asymmetrical twinning" that grants the privileged originary place to realism and subordinates naturalism as either realism's grubby materialist descendent, too concerned with its characters' animal natures and basest behaviors, or its deceptive foil, passing subjective opinion for objective fact (Howard, "Sand" 94, 92). Third, as June Howard argues, among genre theorists there is a "general lack of consensus about what constitutes a genre" as such, concluding that a genre "is not an entity but a configuration of

categories” (“Sand” 93). Thus, trying to describe the differences in disability representations that occur in and between American realist and naturalists texts can often feel like one is playing a game of pin the tail on the donkey except there is no pin and the donkey, quite rightly, will not stand still.

To make this argument stick, as it were, this chapter examines a selection of disability ecologies from late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century novels along two intertwined trajectories. The first frames American literary naturalism not as a school but as an “impulse” (Pizer, *Theory* 7) or thematic disposition (Link 18), what I will refer to as the *naturalist thematic*, that figures bodies as properly biopolitical objects. I demonstrate this articulation by tracing the relationships between naturalist fiction of the 1890s and early 1900s and the changing semiotics of disability during the *fin de siècle*. By the turn of the twentieth century, the concept of disability becomes caught up in a “social crisis” of national feeble-mindedness (Snyder and Mitchell 85) and broader fears of degeneracy fueled by a range of evolutionary theories. In this historical context, the naturalist thematic reifies disability pathology by textualizing the pseudo-scientific interpretive practices of proto-Progressive Era social Darwinism and, thus, casting mental and physical impairments as outward expressions of inner moral spoilage. Given that under liberalism “legal personhood is based on one’s competence and autonomy” (Carey 414), the fetishization of disability as the form of appearance for moral incompetence and dependency continuously legitimates the disqualification of disabled people as undeserving of full civic and economic personhood, or what Stephen Epstein calls “biopolitical citizenship” (21).⁵⁶ In Frank Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute* (1814), for example, the symptoms of tertiary syphilis and “*Lycanthropy-Pathesis*” appear as inevitable indices of Vandover’s inconstant moral nature,

⁵⁶ I develop the relationship between naturalist fiction and biopolitical citizenship in the discussion of Edith Wharton’s novella *Sanctuary* (1903) later in this chapter.

while his inconstant moral nature itself flows from his flawed species and familial heritages. Likewise, in Edith Wharton's *Sanctuary* (1803), Kate Peyton interprets unethical behavior as the expression of inherent disability and bases her actions on the principles of biopolitical citizenship. Both sections of the novella focus on various techniques for the management of spoiled identity.

The second trajectory foregrounds the thematic uses of aesthetics in naturalist fiction—from descriptions of interior design, to the use of taste as a mode of characterization, to meta-commentaries on the relationship between objective “accuracy” and subjective “truth”—that reinforce notions of aesthetic judgment as a product and an index of genetic fitness. Representations of disability afford naturalist authors the opportunity to make aesthetic arguments on behalf of their own generic criteria—meaning that the deployment of disabled characters in naturalist fiction typically forces a return to an aesthetics of embodiment that counters the idealized, disembodied aesthetic of literary realism—that perpetuate contemporary, subjugating assumptions about non-normative embodiments and neurodiversity. As I argue for the relevance of aesthetic discourse as an indicator of “biolegitimacy,” Didier Fassin’s term for the positive valuation of a subject’s biological health as a requisite for citizenship (49), I offer readings of Vandover’s artistic career and Dick Peyton’s architectural practice that suggest that bad taste portends atavistic failure and legitimates disqualification in the naturalist thematic during the *fin de siècle*.

Throughout these analyses, I will trace the effects of this aesthetic intervention as it crosses paths with a stereotypical disability thematic to argue that, despite promising aesthetic experiences informed by nonnormative bodyminds and biological imperatives, naturalist fiction often delivers stock disabled figures in the name of universalism that, ironically, threaten

conceptions of a more democratic body politic. Adapting what June Howard calls “the gesture of naturalism,” meaning the “gathering [of] privileged readers (regardless of what their class position may empirically be)...to stare at the specter of proletarianization” (*Form and History* 105) to a disability context, one sees that the *crippled* gesture of naturalism is to use static representations of pathological disability to create affective aesthetic responses that force a reconsideration of humankind’s nature—past, present, and future—that ultimately benefit normative subjects, rarely disabled ones, and affirm what Tobin Siebers calls the “ideology of ability” (*Disability Theory* 7).

The Naturalist Thematic

My sense of American literary naturalism as an aesthetic form depends on two premises that I refer to collectively as the naturalist thematic. First, I assert that fiction by self-described naturalists can be characterized by a tendency to engage post-Darwinian naturalist science and philosophy at a thematic level, often through metaphors of disability, in order to emphasize incapacity as a universal condition of human being. This position extends a contemporary critical tradition—one indebted to the work of Donald Pizer, June Howard, and Eric Carl Link—that perceives naturalism as constituted by a causal dialectic that produces affective responses in readers, meaning that the contestation of determinism is foundational to naturalism as such. Second, I also claim that many of these narratives assert their own aesthetic fitness by actively framing their own aesthetic practices in two ways: as oppositional to then-dominant realist conventions and by dramatizing the importance of taste. While it is no great revelation to state that aspiring authors often define their aesthetic practices in opposition to other sets of dominant conventions, the self-reflexive avowals of aesthetic sophistication in American literary

naturalism are particular in that they often appeal to emergent theories of natural philosophy, often through embodied metaphors of disability as a trope of characterization. For Frank Norris and other literary naturalists who perceived realism as too genteel to represent social problems outside realism's middle-class milieu (qtd. in Campbell 501), disability operates as a preferred trope to textualize a species-body caught between its embodied drives and desires and the socially produced conditions of industrialization.⁵⁷ If realist representations of society's so-called "finer and higher aspects which unite rather than sever humanity" (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 21) in novels by William Dean Howells and Mark Twain, for example, anachronistically maintain antebellum, "pre-industrial, [and] pre-Darwinian" middle-class ideals (Pizer, *Twentieth-Century* 3), the narratives associated with American literary realism situate those ideals in a dialectic with contemporary scientific and philosophical theories that juxtapose providential causality with the material effects of natural law.

The popularity of new theories of naturalistic science and philosophy and the development of a nascent industrial political economy during the American *fin de siècle* established conditions in which the popular perception of disability and the aesthetic practices of American narrative fiction were both transformed. By the 1890s, as Donald Pizer reminds us, Americans began to reckon with the effects of two prior decades of tremendous socio-economic upheaval, particularly "the rapid shift from a predominantly rural, agrarian civilization to an urban, industrial society, and the transition from traditional religious faith and moral belief to skepticism and uncertainty" (*Twentieth-Century* 3). During this time, American citizens "understood their nationality, allegiances, and distinctions, at least in part, in biological terms" (Rose and Novas 441). The displacement of providential causality by the evolutionary theories of

⁵⁷ Despite the common perception of naturalism as a minor type of realism, Norris states that "naturalism is a form of romanticism, not an inner circle of realism," and he famously dismisses the latter for its "crises of cups of tea" ("Zola" 1108, 1106).

Charles Darwin as well as post-Darwinian natural philosophers such as Herbert Spencer, who reintegrated Lamarckian evolutionary theory with natural selection, disrupted the epistemological and ontological certainty offered by religious models of causality. The stakes of this conflict include the very nature of mankind—a being either made in the image of God or evolved from earlier primates—and its possibilities for the future—either capable of mastering the world through work and faith or resigned to act upon urges in a world that forever eludes human control. Although utopic novels of this period, like Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1914), take up these debates to suggest a progressive future (Link 69), the majority of naturalist novels—including those by Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and Edith Wharton—narrate a protagonist’s ineffectual struggle against biological and social forces and his or her decline toward animality, bare life, and death.⁵⁸ This tendency, what Eric Carl Link calls “negative literary naturalism” (69), has led to an enduring characterization of the genre as preoccupied with determinist philosophy and human kind’s brutish animality.

This specter of determinism has long haunted American literary naturalism. George Becker famously characterizes the naturalist’s displacement of providential certainty with material causality as “pessimistic materialistic determinism” (35). Based in part upon an oversimplified view of natural selection, the deterministic view posits that characters in naturalist fiction exist in a state of conflict with elemental or primitive forces that are metaphorically embodied either by features of the natural environment (the negative temperatures of the Yukon Territory in Jack London’s “To Build a Fire” (1908), for example) or social institutions beyond

⁵⁸ Eric Carl Link describes these alternate positions as “positive” and “negative” literary naturalism, respectively (69). Although the positive term is useful in distinguishing overtly optimistic engagements with natural philosophy, such as Bellamy’s utopic fiction, the negative term implies a teleology of ruin that the novels to which the term is applied do not always or often conform.

the characters' capacity to transform or reshape (such as the slums in Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) or the conservative conventions of *The Four Hundred* in Edith Wharton's society novels). Situated in insurmountable circumstances, naturalistic characters repetitively enact the same experiences until they are acted upon (Lehan 232). Unlike realist characters whose *raison d'être* is to dramatize the exercise of free will in the face of ethical challenges (Campbell 504), the naturalist character, according to June Howard's summary of the deterministic view, is "the brutal Other...condemned endlessly to act out the same bestial drives without any possibility of rising to an appreciation of beauty or an understanding of self and surroundings," one who instinctually capitulates to totalizing, degrading circumstances over which he or she has no control (Howard, *Form and History* 119). So the theory goes.

Despite this classificatory durability, literary scholars in the late 20th century have convincingly argued that what appears in naturalist fiction as a broad thematic dependency on hereditary determinism is merely a form of appearance for a generically foundational contradiction between determinism and free will. Broadly speaking, these critical reappraisals fall into two closely related camps: those that foreground philosophical discontinuities in the texts themselves, illustrated by the approaches of Donald Pizer and Eric Carl Link, and those that place emphasis on the reader's role in adjudicating those discontinuities, illustrated by the approaches of Charles Child Walcutt and June Howard. These critics have established a tradition that affirms the dramatic representation of philosophical indeterminacy as constitutive of naturalism as such, not as an indication that the matter has been decided one way or the other.

Pizer and Link both reject Becker's determinist hypothesis by emphasizing the multitude of philosophical approaches that traverse individual works of naturalist fiction. Instead of seeing the textualizations of natural philosophy as an endorsement of base animality, Pizer sees the

“commitment of most naturalists to a tragic view of man’s condition” in light of broader social “pulls of change and temperament” as a sign of its humanism (*Theory* 40). The struggles of Stephen Crane’s Maggie or Norris’s Vandover do not celebrate carnality, according to this view, but speak to “the value and uniqueness of man’s [sic] felt inner life” in the face of antagonistic social actors (*Theory* 40). Pizer also takes issue with the presumption that naturalist fiction espouses a single mechanistic philosophy, instead arguing that a philosophical dialectic is constitutive of the naturalist “tendency” itself. In “The Naturalism of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*” (1995), for example, Pizer argues that Wharton issues a direct challenge to hard determinism by allowing some characters to rise above and others to sink below the circumstances of their birth through the soft determinism of social influence. Following this tradition, Eric Carl Link’s *The Vast and Terrible Drama* (2004) describes naturalism not as a genre, but as a “way of writing” that “incorporate[s] at the *thematic* ... level scientific or philosophical concepts” derived from then-current naturalistic theories (xii, 18). Emphatically refuting Becker’s thesis by arguing that in naturalist fiction “determinism was [sic] not a *statement*, but a *question*,” Link suggests that “negative” naturalism avoids hard determinism by dramatizing the conflict between philosophies of causality to show that the outcome might always be otherwise (104, original emphasis).

Walcutt and Howard likewise describe naturalism as an aggregate of often conflicting philosophical positions and argue that readers are meant to perceive the often ill-fated ends of characters as only one of many possible outcomes. Bracketed by a dynamic binary of predetermined heredity and free will, naturalistic characters are fated to affirm the failed state of human kind as they succumb repeatedly to forces that they cannot control, suffer the ill effects of environmental forces they cannot withstand, and finally degenerate into states of subhuman

socio-economic disqualification. Both Walcutt and Howard argue, however, that *readers* of naturalistic fiction are encouraged both to recognize that these systemic forces and environmental factors might come under human control and to use these fatalistic representations as kindling for their own desires to address extratextual social and systemic inequalities (Howard, *Form and History* 39; Walcutt 29). In *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream* (1956), Charles Child Walcutt admits that naturalism *does* concede “that the state of man needs to be improved,” but argues that the genre undermines any obdurate determinism by also insisting that the “material causes [of human conditions]...can be traced, recorded, understood, and, finally, controlled” (24). In her earliest study of the genre, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985), June Howard characterizes this indeterminacy as constitutive of the genre as such, and she describes it as an affective dialect of “fate and hope” that plays out in the “spectators,” or readers, who are meant to see possibilities for intervention and change in each fallen protagonist (*Form and History* 39, 105). Viewed in this way, naturalistic fiction is meant to produce social effects, and naturalistic representations of human brutality, antisociality, and degeneracy are said to speak not to an anxiety concerning their unavoidable proliferation, but to the possibility of their own effacement if readers dare put down their novels and lift their piteous hands. As Walcutt writes, naturalism relocates volitional action from characters and “transfer[s] [it] to the reader and to society at large” (27). The protagonist in Wharton’s novella *Sanctuary*, Kate Orme, articulates this view when she realizes that, “at last, life lay before her as it was: not brave, garlanded, and victorious, but naked, groveling and diseased, dragging its maimed limbs through the mud, yet lifting piteous hands to the stars” (*Sanctuary* 63).

This dialectic offers what Nikolas Rose and Carlos Novas call “the political economy of hope,” meaning in this case a belief or wish that disability can be overcome through self-care and

maintenance (442). This political economy does not privilege one predetermined outcome but instead is an active state that “comprises a domain of possibility, anticipation, and expectation that requires action and awareness of the present in order to realize a range of potential futures” (452). In opposition to the determinist conception that biology is destiny, the political economy of hope includes practices and beliefs premised on the idea that “biology is no longer blind destiny, or even a foreseen but implacable fate. It is knowable, mutable, improvable, and eminently manipulable” (Rose and Novas 442).

Despite the force of these challenges to pessimistic materialistic determinism, the role of disability in naturalistic fiction provides a compelling argument for its preservation. This critical reorientation away from hard determinism and toward ontological indeterminacy matters deeply when considering the position of disability as a thematic trope in naturalist fiction. This reoriented understanding of naturalism’s thematic preoccupations does not, however, displace the deterministic conception of disability in many evolutionary theories that disability representations evoke, nor does it deny the view that corporeal and cognitive differences appear as embodied pathological indices of undesirable futures that characters strive to avoid. If the reader of naturalism is meant to hope, the nature of that hope is to forestall the disabled, degenerate state that the texts insist lie in wait like a malevolent promise for each of us if we fail to act on our best moral, ethical, and aesthetic natures. In works as diverse as Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute* (1914) and Edith Wharton’s *Sanctuary* (1903), disability operates as a mark of deterministic unfitness and the grounds for unequal treatment, subordination, and elimination or death.

The Disabled Face of Degeneracy

As both a social identity and a trope of representation, disability has continued to define what an ideal American liberal subject is *not* for almost two and a half centuries. During the late-nineteenth century, however, a crisis of feeble-mindedness instrumentalized disability and radically revised the common perception of it, most notably the sense that disability was no longer a problem that only affected *individuals* but rather threatened entire *populations*. In the antebellum period, disability was often perceived by dominant culture as an issue that affected individuals and families who, with the occasional help of religious charities, were often able to integrate disabled family members into household economies that were solely responsible for any additional care that the disabled person required. This state of affairs does not represent an idyllic past, however, for like all supposed “dependents,” disabled people “were expected to forfeit their civil rights in exchange for care” to “the head of the household [who] possessed broad discretion to handle matters regarding his dependents” (Carey 415).⁵⁹ Understood as the head of household’s responsibility, disabled people caused little concern to citizens to whom they were not related. In the postbellum period, however, disability became an issue of public health and was firmly embedded in political economy, a state of affairs that eugenicists used to argue for increased state regulation of disabled people’s lives. Allison C. Carey writes, “With the rise of medical institutions and the welfare state [at the end of the nineteenth century], people with disabilities no longer depended solely upon their families or communities for support, but upon the entire state or nation. They had become a tax burden” (416). As disability became

⁵⁹ Dominant culture perceived disability in minority communities in quite different terms. Disability was often linked to racial atavism, as evidenced by both P. T. Barnum’s exoticized enfreakment of African Americans and attitudes toward African slaves. Barnum often made his African American performers appear as paradigms of a presumably primitive African subject, including his exhibition of Joice Heth, the so-called nursemaid of George Washington whose age and race were made to stand in for the physical monstrosity of racial Others. Similarly, slaveholders and their apologists held the common pseudo-scientific belief among that “Africans’ innate physical and mental limitations made them unfit to live in any environment other than bondage in a warm, humid climate” (Boster 19).

increasingly determined at the national level by social policies and political economy, naturalist authors who critique those institutions in the spirit of proto-Progressivism found disability a ready-made topos at their disposal. It was commonly held that the nation “could be strengthened by attention to the individual and collective biological bodies of those who constituted it” (Rose and Novas 444). The disabled figure came to portend the degeneration of entire populations.

In the postbellum years, a range of U.S. institutions and actors—from politicians to social scientists to medical professionals to novelists—became increasingly concerned about degeneracy and addressed it at the level of the population through symbolic practices that often took material shape in the care and maintenance of individual bodies, particularly non-normative ones (Carlson 13–4). As a concept of public health and object of biopolitical hegemony, degeneration theory collates various non-normative expressions of human embodiment and health, including disparate characteristics like genetic variation, excessive sexuality, and nervousness, as well as cultural and moral practices, including laziness and theft, into one catchall term that marks the object’s disqualification from full civic and economic participation (Siebers, *Aesthetics* 31).⁶⁰ Despite their deep divisions over the mechanism of heredity,⁶¹ this heterogeneous assemblage of actors held in common the belief that “the application of biology

⁶⁰ Max Nordau famously transports degeneration from the socio-medical register to the arts in *Degeneration* (1892), in which he argues that contemporary “degenerate” art is both a symptom of neurasthenia and an instrument for its transmission and reproduction.

⁶¹ The furor concerning feeble-mindedness occurred against an American scientific background undergoing profound upheaval. More broadly, practitioners of natural science began to professionalize into narrow disciplines that no longer shared common bodies of knowledge and epistemologies; more specifically for feeble-mindedness, the scientific community was deeply divided concerning the mechanism of heredity. While Darwinian evolution was largely accepted in late 19th century natural science, there was significant disagreement concerning the mechanism that compelled it. Natural selection, Darwin’s mechanism, contends that evolution is purely random: species exhibit an unpredictable range of somatic variations, and the environment eliminates nonadaptive variations. Many natural philosophers and scientists who were trained to see the development of species as linear and purposeful opposed natural selection and offered competing theories of evolution of considerable scientific validity that briefly displaced Darwinism at the turn of the 20th century. These theories—primarily Lamarckism, orthogenesis, and mutation theory—attempted to restore design and human control to evolution. For a discussion of the most relevant alternate theories’ influence on disability and naturalism, see the following section “American Literary Naturalism and the Biopolitical Aesthetics of Human Disqualification” below.

and medicine” could neutralize “the perceived problems of modern society,” enhance the population, and protect the state (Stern 6). Through this articulation of actors, the joint response appears as a “citizenship project” (Rose and Novas 439), meaning a system of considering (or reconsidering, in the case of those diagnosed as “feeble-minded”) the citizenship rights of some individuals and the means through which those subjects could be administrated, regulated, and controlled.

While degeneracy theory had taken root in French natural philosophy, the concerns were recast in the U.S. context as an epidemic of feeble-mindedness triggered by a steep drop in the U.S. intelligence quotient between 1890 and 1930 (Snyder and Mitchell 72). Carey explains that, “from the late eighteenth century through to the 1940s or so, conservative eugenicists portrayed the ‘feeble-minded’ as a ‘disease’ plaguing society and advocated rights restrictions as a means to control this population” (412). This “disease” was only nominally located in the mind, however, for “mental defect” was understood as the in-built cause of a wide range of physical disabilities, including “epilepsy, deafness, blindness, paralysis, hydro- and microcephaly, trauma, tuberculosis, asthma, inflammation, sclerosis, syphilis, and cretinism” as well as aesthetic difference (Snyder and Mitchell 78). As early as 1900, U.S. politics and social sciences converged in the widespread development of a national eugenic ideology and related set of practices designed to combat a perceived “epidemic” of feeble-mindedness that threatened to metastasize in the body politic, overburden government-based charitable institutions, and risk the survival of the nation. Like the term degeneracy, “feeble-mindedness” operates as a boundary object that provides “dangerous interpretive flexibility” in its capaciousness, “conflat[ing] myriad social problems such as poverty, growing immigrant and nonwhite populations, unemployment, and criminality with purported medical and scientific diagnoses of cognitive

impairment” (Jarman). For example, the category of feeble-mindedness was intentionally broad so that symptoms might be found in nonnormative somatic or neurological characteristics, such as congenital amputations or schizophrenia, as well as benign human variations associated with freed slaves and nonwhite immigrants (Stern 6); alternative cultural practices, such as “a perceived (in)ability to adhere to the gendered norms of the household” (Vogt); and so-called anti-social behaviors found among “paupers, criminals, [and] prostitutes” (Carlson 13).

The representation of disabled people in the naturalist thematic overlaps with the protocols for diagnosing and managing the feeble-minded. Seeking to “improve” the American stock through the “positive” practices of good breeding and the “negative” practices of elimination,⁶² eugenicists used theories of the “germ plasm” and later Mendelian genetics to justify a regime of biopolitical aesthetics that relied upon the visual observation of “defective” physical traits to classify someone as feeble-minded.⁶³ Describing the network of institutional supports that enabled the pathologization of feeble-mindedness and mobilized the range of responses to it, Carey writes:

By drawing upon narratives of incompetence, dependence and deviance, eugenicists did not simply create new medical understandings of feeble-mindedness. Rather, they relied upon American constructions of citizenship, based in political liberal philosophy, which justified these characteristics as legitimate reasons for exclusion. (418)

⁶² Alexandra Minna Stern cautions against the obfuscating capacity of the terms “positive” and “negative,” as well as the alternative dyad “mainline” and “reform,” suggesting that advocates of both methodologies were also typically “heavily invested” in the other (9). The terms remain useful when one accounts for their rhetorical use: “positive” practices encouraged or coerced subjects to perform specific activities and habits, while “negative” practices forced subjects to undergo procedures or submit to legislation governing behavior. Sterilization itself is not a negative practice, especially for men and women who choose it as a form of birth control, but becomes negative when it is enforced upon a subject against his or her wishes or without prior knowledge.

⁶³ I develop the term “biopolitical aesthetics” in the following section, “American Literary Naturalism and the Biopolitical Aesthetic of Human Disqualification.”

These institutional practices drew heavily on aesthetic criteria as eugenics field workers assayed biovalue and granted or rescinded biopolitical citizenship to subjects. Acts of eugenic classification depended on the judgments of eugenics field workers who charted family pedigrees by observing the capacity of individuals and families to perform “white, middle-class gender and sexual norms”—those who met expectations were labeled “N” for “normal,” and those who appeared to deviate were labeled “F” for feeble-minded (Vogt).⁶⁴ Even those labeled “N” for normal on field workers’ pedigrees were subjected to administration, for any evidence of feeble-mindedness in the family tree indicated the presence of a “hereditary ‘germ’”—later, gene—that could be passed on by a normal carrier (Vogt). Once classified as feeble-minded or believed to carry the debilitating germ plasm, the subject could be treated or contained and the defect eliminated, often through compulsory sterilization.

Such a conflation of anti-social behavior with inbuilt inferiority provided justification for the state to control individuals classified as feeble-minded as a precursor to a broader “massifying” form of control “that is directed not at man-as-body but man-as-species” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 243). Michel Foucault describes such an ever-evolving system of state intervention as “a bio-politics of the population” (*The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* 139, original emphasis). Biopolitics, according to Foucault, is the combined product of two sets of similar practices:

we have, then, two technologies of power.... One technique is disciplinary; it centers on the body, produces individualizing effects, and manipulates the body as a source of forces that have to be rendered both useful and docile. And we also have a second technology which is

⁶⁴ The nature of these judgments demonstrates the complicated relationship between aesthetics and socio-political marginalization, what Tobin Siebers calls “disqualification” (“Disqualification” 1) after Foucault. I explore this relationship in the next section of the chapter.

centered not upon the body but upon life: a technology which brings together the mass effects characteristic of a population. (*Defended* 249)

It is within the expanding logic of capitalism at the end of the 19th century that these two technologies of power are fully integrated and the contemporary disabled subject is born. While much writing about biopolitics focuses on the first technique and individual self-management practices, Didier Fassin argues that Foucauldian biopolitics at its core “is a politics of population understood as a community of living beings” (Fassin 46). David T. Mitchell describes the aim of biopolitical management of disabled people as being “to more actively police [them] in order to decrease possibilities of polluting the nation’s reproductive pool with the generational transmission of inferior hereditary characteristics” (*Biopolitics of Disability* 8). In the case of feeble-mindedness, disability in an unregulated population threatens the survival of the state itself by weakening the “national stock” through reproduction; to prevent the realization of this atavistic dystopia, the population requires normalization, meaning that non-normative subjects must be “increasingly immobilized within the nation” (*Biopolitics of Disability* 7).

The biopolitical approach to the management of disability became material in Indiana House Bill 118 of 1905, the first recorded restriction of state marriage licenses based on feeble-mindedness. Once signed into law, Bill 118 barred from marriage anyone declared an “imbecile, epileptic, of unsound mind,” any “male person who is or has been within five years an inmate of any county asylum or home for indigent persons,” those with “an incurable or transmissible disease,” as well as applicants who were currently drunk or otherwise addicted to drugs (qtd. in Lantzer 29). Beginning in 1907 with the passage of the first mandatory sterilization law in Indiana, U.S. states involuntarily sterilized over 65,000 people to prevent their disability from infecting the national stock (Stern qtd. in García). During the first decade of the twentieth

century, the example of biopolitical intervention set by the Indiana state legislature spread to thirty two additional U.S. states and twelve additional countries who passed their own involuntary sterilization laws (Stern 2; Lombardo ix).⁶⁵ The U.S. eugenics policy developed as part of a broader “Eugenic Atlantic,” what David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder call the coordinated exchange of scientific and political information throughout Western nations meant to disrupt the spread of degeneration. An awareness of a Eugenic Atlantic necessarily illuminates the global nature of disability without sacrificing the local variations and the historically contingent nature of eugenics in local manifestations. As Paul Lombardo reminds those who see U.S. eugenics as a monolith of either Nazi social democracy or nascent American neoliberalism, “the definition of eugenics was always changing” in response to local “idiosyncratic motives” and historically contingent justifications, including “hereditary degeneracy, social and economic efficiency, neo-Malthusian population policy, or ‘sins of the father’ religious determinism” (6–7).

Inflected by these developing discourses in state systems premised upon economic rationality and capitalist production, disability—as a category, identity, and condition—appears as a form of irrationality. The frenzy concerning the biopolitical management of disability at the end of the nineteenth century “was informed by deep-seated economic and social pressures that fed an increasingly medicalized approach to problems plaguing newly urbanized locales” (Snyder and Mitchell 70). As Mitchell and Snyder remind us, the term “disability” was first used in the mid-1800s to “designate those incapable of work due to injury” (“Multitude” 184). This early use of the term referred both to physical and mental variations that were believed to limit one’s ability to fulfill normative labor requirements. The various justifications for eugenic

⁶⁵ The last of such U.S. state laws was finally repealed by West Virginia in 2013.

practices in the U.S. hold in common an anxiety about the economic costs associated with feeble-mindedness or other defective typologies, whether those manifest as anxieties about lost labor capacity, the costs of accommodation, or the depletion of natural resources due to surplus unproductive populations.

As the economic rationality of capitalism expanded into a near totalizing network of personal, social, and resource-based management practices, disabled people were seen as lacking the “surplus labor power” that is vital to capitalist political economy. Unlike the capitalist interpellation and management of women and African-Americans, which Carey argues was based upon the desire to control resources—“women’s reproductive and productive labor power,” on the one hand, and low-cost or free productive labor power on the other—the rational management of disability turned upon the “control of the unproductive and socially different” and “was viewed as necessary to limit the economic and social burden of disability on families and society” (420, 421). Workplaces, technologies, methods, and practices of capitalist production—from the factory floors of manufacture to the halls of higher education—have been designed for the easy interchange of normative bodies. All attempts to retrofit or reverse engineer these spaces, objects, and processes continue to be understood as financial burdens that decrease profits by hampering efficiency and constraining productivity. Thus, the developing logic of capitalism has framed any accommodations for disabled people as acts of social inutility. Viewed not as unemployed but as unemployable, unable to compete in a normative workplace yet incapable of exerting downward pressure on the price of labor, disabled people have been exiled to the ill-defined but heavily administrated area beyond the margin of productive economic activity. In short, disabled people have been disqualified from the ranks of quality human beings according to biopolitical criteria.

American Literary Naturalism and the Biopolitical Aesthetics of Human Disqualification

Presented by naturalist authors as a form of social science that reveals life as “a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death” (Norris, “Zola” 1107), naturalist fiction seems to traffic in existential doubts similar to those voiced in the American response to the proliferation of feeble-mindedness. Like eugenics field workers who scour families for signs of feeble-mindedness, readers of naturalism are trained by the crippled gesture of naturalism to perceive a character’s nonnormative characteristics—from physical and cognitive impairments to moral inconstancy and economic rapaciousness—as signs of essential hereditary defects (or newly acquired yet heritable ones) that justify that character’s social, political, and economic disqualification. This analogy is not meant to suggest that naturalist fictions, or their authors, expressly advocate eugenics or necessarily ought to be read through the lens of eugenics discourse (although why not?), but to suggest that naturalism deploys a disability thematic that integrates material and semiotic markers of aberrance in its logic of invalidation. Thus, the disability ecologies represented in these texts illustrate how the biopolitical aesthetics of human disqualification structure disabled peoples’ lives in extra-literary contexts.

Naturalistic fictions can provide insight into the range of material, non-literary processes by which some humans judge, classify, and disqualify other humans, what I call the *biopolitical aesthetics of human disqualification*. As Caroline Levine argues, a single form—be it capitalist production, sexism, or ableism—“can organize both social and literary objects” (13), and I aim to demonstrate how biopolitical aesthetics produces marginalized, disqualified literary objects. The term “biopolitical aesthetics” provides distinct advantages over similar terms such as David

D. Yuan's "nationalist body aesthetics" (72), which is value-laden but conceptually spare, meaning it implies a top-down governmental disciplinary technique without specifying its subject matter; Snyder and Mitchell's "biological aesthetics" (103), which is conceptually full but its ambiguous causality risks a scientific neutrality that Snyder and Mitchell presumably would not condone if the term were to move outside the discourse of disability theory; and Tobin Siebers's straightforward "aesthetics" ("Disqualification" 1) which threatens to dematerialize the entire concept for those who are unaware of the term's affective and political roots particular to Siebers's usage.⁶⁶ In its differences, "biopolitical aesthetics" de-reifies the pathological status of non-normative behaviors and practices that eugenic thought treats as pure manifestations of genetics or biology but are, in fact, not; it acknowledges the socio-political *intentions* of aesthetic disqualification under an ableist regime;⁶⁷ and, finally, the term makes explicit the political potential of aesthetic forms, clearing space for the expression of productive capacities that are unique to non-normative bodyminds. These distinctions allow the concept of biopolitical aesthetics to encompass, for example, the precipitating causes of the crisis of feeble-mindedness, the network of actors and biopolitical strategies that produced the feeble-minded or otherwise disabled, the socio-political effects that disabled people experience, and the social effects of their representations in literary art. An awareness of biopolitical aesthetics affords literary texts not only the ability to be marked by but also to mark their historical moments.

Since at least the eighteenth century the dominant sense of aesthetics has advocated a disembodied, disinterested approach to works of art that engage the intellect at the expense of the

⁶⁶ See Tobin Siebers's *The Subject and Other Subjects* (U of Michigan P, 1998).

⁶⁷ Although the concept of disability ecology grants that power is distributed through a range of social actors, it also draws upon Scott Kirsch and Don Mitchell's sense that relational power also can be "centered in institutions, in individuals, or in *structured* social relations" (Kirsch and Mitchell 691, original emphasis). This important extension of ANT allows one to establish "causes of, and thus accountability for, the effects of power" and returns attention to "power's (also relational) productive dimensions" (692).

body (Siebers, *Aesthetics* 1). Tobin Siebers rejects this approach, describing aesthetics as interpenetrating all forms of social life and acting as the basis for interpersonal interactions; he argues that, “When a person encounters another person, what really happens is a meeting between two bodies at the level of appearance and its attendant emotions” (*Aesthetics* 1; “Disqualification” 2). While Siebers perceives these immediate reactions as “the substrata on which aesthetic responses are based” (“Disqualification” 2), meaning that affective responses precede aesthetic ones, I contend that such affective responses are always already aesthetic.⁶⁸ As I argue in a preceding chapter, bodies do not innately *know* disability; subjects in particular historical contexts *recognize* it. Instead of reflexively recoiling in disgust from bodily differences, one interpellates a standard of biopolitical taste that countenances the rejection and disqualification of certain bodies that fail to achieve a given culture’s lowest aesthetic threshold. Put another way, one learns the appropriate types of revulsion for superficial or sensorial differences and reacts to them from a position of aesthetic knowledge.

The incarnation of the biopolitical aesthetics of human disqualification in naturalist fiction is structured by the concatenation of two antithetical systems that sorts characters into non-disabled and disabled categories and justifies unequal socio-economic treatment. The first system enacts a pre-Darwinian Linnaean taxonomy that recognizes superficial characteristics as indices of an organism’s essential qualities and deploys them in texts as disabling details that ground categorization in the classification of external features. The categorical results of the first system are then fed into a second system that selectively misreads the mechanism of Darwinian natural selection so that differentiation and “descent” suggest atavism, not evolutionary variation

⁶⁸ Because Siebers wants to bring aesthetic theory to bear on social interaction, he establishes this hierarchy of affective response for an important reason: if aesthetics is to function as a “human science” that allows us to investigate interpersonal, social interactions, the object of that study cannot be aesthetics itself. Thus, Siebers selects affective, embodied responses to other bodies as the type of object that aesthetic theory can illuminate.

or mutability in search of fitness to a changing environment.⁶⁹ Just as Sir Francis Galton⁷⁰ and employees of the Eugenics Record Office (1910-1939) in Cold Springs Harbor, New York, used observable traits, behaviors, and attitudes as the basis for disqualifying “defectives” from full socio-economic participation in society, naturalist authors use physiological, neurological, and aesthetic disabilities as indexes of a character’s general unfitness and justifications for disqualification. On these grounds, physiognomic and other corporeal features, as well as social behaviors, practices, and beliefs function as relatively stable signifiers that allow for the categorization, valuation, and disqualification of characters as defective. Rewriting Darwinian descent to suggest that certain superficial traits judged as maladaptations—feble-mindedness or the performance of non-normative gender roles, for example—not only signify a person’s essential qualities but also enjoy *proliferation* instead of suffering extinction through natural selection, the biological aesthetics of human disqualification produces a persuasive discourse by annealing false metaphysics with an instrumentalized misreading of scientific theory. This convention of representation is consistent with diagnostic practices in the late-nineteenth century in which “physical disabilities were essentially downgraded to the status of stigmata” that revealed internal mental defect (Snyder and Mitchell 78).

This classificatory process is often textualized in naturalist fiction by aligning various states of disablement with a range of *fin de siècle* evolutionary theories that together situate

⁶⁹ In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin does argue that “weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind” due to an “instinct of sympathy” in mankind that authorizes “asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick” and “medical men [who] exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment,” and he concludes that these practices are “highly injurious to the race of man” (159). Social Darwinists and eugenicists presumably stop reading at this point, for Darwin continues: “Nor could we check our sympathy, even at the urging of hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature” (159). Thus, Darwin argues that aid for the non-normative is double-edged: it weakens the physical stock of the race, but it elevates the race’s morality, which is an essential characteristic that separates man from lower animals. Said another way, the non-normative *do* have value but only insofar as they allow the normative to further perfect themselves.

⁷⁰ Galton’s monograph *Heredity and Genius* (1869) established the use of statistical methods to study human difference and is the cornerstone on which the Eugenic Atlantic was built.

individual characters at specific points along the fate-hope continuum. As turn-of-the-century politicians, social scientists, religious leaders, political activists, and novelists faced contemporary social crises, they did so in relation to a community of natural scientists at odds over the human role in evolution. Darwinian natural selection, seen as a form of hard heredity (or fate) that stripped God and man of agency in human development, was routinely challenged by a variety of mechanisms of soft heredity meant to restore free will and volition (or hope) to human development.⁷¹ These battles between hard and soft determinism limn the field in which the conflicts between fate and hope in naturalist fiction take place: the more fated (or dependent on hard determinism) the character, the more disabled and discreditable; the more hopeful (or capable of affecting the acquisition of traits) the character, the more likely he or she is capable of maintaining normalcy, overcoming disabling environmental factors, and affirming the liberal subject.

By dramatizing these developments, literary disability operates as the site where the nature of humankind is contested in the interstices between conflicting theories of evolution, from the collective mechanism of Darwinian natural selection to the liberal individualism of neo-Lamarckian adaptation. No matter if one theory posits an inevitable evolutionary degradation, as does Alpheus Hyatt's orthogenetic Lamarckism,⁷² and another offers the possibility of a self-directed future, as does Edward Drinker Cope's emphasis on use-inheritance (Bowler 127, 124),

⁷¹ Following Darwin's theory of natural selection, hard heredity—which results in what is unsurprisingly called “hard determinism”—is a mechanism we might liken to fate in that it signifies the expression of an organism's predetermined characteristics regardless of environmental influence; soft heredity and its resulting “soft determinism,” most often associated with Lamarckist use-inheritance (the belief that an organism's repetitive actions—whether volitional or not—can produce physiological changes in the course of a single lifetime and that those changes can be transmitted to offspring), implies a hope for an improved future through the development of acquired but heritable traits through an organism's habitual responses to environmental factors.

⁷² Hyatt also famously advocated a theory of “racial senescence” that established women and non-white men as genetically inferior by insisting that these populations possess a ““limit to the progressive [evolutionary] complications which may take place in any type, beyond which it can only proceed by reversing the process, and retrograding”” (qtd. in Bowler 129).

the disabled, degenerate body demands suppression through self-willed action or extinction through orthogenetic development. Regardless of any given character's final trajectory—the ruin of Vandover, the hard-won homeostasis of Dick Peyton, or the muted reemergence of Curtis Jadwin—disability remains a state of disqualification to be avoided at any cost. It is precisely the tensions between hard and soft determinisms, one particular iteration of the naturalist thematic, that Norris and Wharton capture in *Vandover and the Brute* and *Sanctuary*, respectively, yet this ambiguity is paid for by the disqualification of disability through biopolitical aesthetics.

Atavism and Fitness in Frank Norris's *Vandover and the Brute*

Frank Norris's earliest attempt at a naturalist novel, *Vandover and the Brute* (1914, written 1894-5) stages the conflict between fatalistic determinism and a progressive optimism by juxtaposing hard hereditary and the development of acquired characteristics through environmental influence within Vandover's radically changing body.⁷³ Although Dan Colson argues that the novel offers “a direct challenge to [Herbert] Spencer” (40), who popularized the concept of social Darwinism, by foregrounding the social factors that compel Vandover's descent at the expense of an unavoidable hereditary determinism, I contend that through the naturalist thematic the novel textualizes multiple evolutionary theories—Vandover degenerates along an orthogenetic Lamarckist trajectory,⁷⁴ for example, while Charlie Geary succeeds by adopting the principles of social Darwinism—to hypothesize possible futures for American

⁷³ On Norris's awareness of evolutionary theory, it is worth quoting Dan Colson (2011) at length:

There is no concrete evidence beyond his fiction that Norris knew much about Charles Darwin or Spencer. We know that he was a student at the University of California, Berkeley, when Le Conte was a professor there, that he took Le Conte's “geology and zoology courses...in his junior year,” and that “he...voluntarily attended at least some of Le Conte's lectures on reproduction” (McElrath and Crisler 122). At very least, Norris was familiar with Le Conte, who shared Spencer's late career fascination with Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. (30)

⁷⁴ Lamarckism allows for the development and transmission of acquired characteristics during a single organism's lifetime, and the concept of orthogenesis allows that evolution proceeds linearly based upon an organism's in-built factors or forces that “may even lead to extinction” (Bowler 7).

society, not foreclose them. Disability, however, always appears as a heritable threat and marks the lower limit of human degeneration.

It is important to keep in mind that while Spencer's theory of social Darwinism may owe a titular debt to Charles Darwin, it derives its actual mechanism for social improvement from the evolutionary theory of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck whose *Philosophie Zoologique* appeared in 1809, fifty years before the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859).⁷⁵ Darwinian natural selection places individual organisms in a neutral position, meaning that the adaptability of any species depends upon—or is determined by—the interaction of predetermined hereditary characteristics with environmental factors beyond the species' control. Unwilling to accept the human rolelessness in Darwin's mechanism, Spencer—like many other evolutionists, including late-nineteenth century American natural scientists Edward Drinker Cope, Alpheus Hyatt, and Joseph LeConte—continued to draw on Lamarck's evolutionary theory, which provides an opportunity to imagine, or hope, that organisms could influence their own evolution through purposeful action. Lamarck offers a “two-factor theory of evolution” that attempts to reconcile the contrasting ideas of evolution as teleological progress and evolution as a product of purposeful human activity (Gould 186). Lamarck's first factor, a normative evolutionary model positioned as the “true order of nature,” establishes a teleology of progress characterized by increasing complexity. Lamarck states that, “in each kingdom of living bodies the groups are arranged in a single graduated series.... This series...should contain the simplest and least organized of living beings at its anterior extreme, and ends with those whose organization and

⁷⁵ While Colson suggests that Spencer's interest in Lamarck was merely a “late-career fascination” (30), Peter J. Bowler shows in *The Eclipse of Darwinism* (1992) that Spencer held Lamarckian views of evolution before and after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859 (59). While Darwin rejects Lamarckism, especially his theory of acquired characteristics, by elevating environmental constraints into the main engine of evolution, Spencer himself argues in “The Inadequacy of Natural Selection” (1864) that “either there has been inheritance of acquired characters, or there has been no evolution” (621).

faculties are most perfect” (Lamarck qtd. in Gould 187). In addition to the primary force of evolutionary progress, Lamarck argues for a secondary force, or ““special factor,”” that allows organisms to adapt physiologically to their environments by developing new heritable traits through changing habits and repetitively using or disusing particular pre-existing characteristics (Lamarck qtd. in Gould 187). To illustrate his concept of use-inheritance, Lamarck famously argues that a giraffe that repeatedly strains its long neck grazing from the tops of trees will develop a longer neck during its lifetime and pass this trait to its offspring (Gould 188).

Lamarck’s second, special factor promised a “rapid mechanism that would give human beings control over their own progress” if properly managed (Bowler 61) but also threatened maladaptation if not properly harnessed. The obverse side of this optimistic model, however, implies that the repetition of undesirable activities, either by volition in an otherwise hospitable environment or by necessity in a threatening or degraded one, leads to the development of nonadaptive characteristics, or disabilities, that can also be passed to offspring, thus threatening the future of the species. Spencer’s evolutionary theory combines the concept of fitness that justifies the subordination of the weak by the strong, but softens its determinism by arguing that the liberal individual can—and by implication should—overcome heredity and environment through volitional action.

If one reads all social and physiological developments in *Vandover and the Brute* through the lens of social Darwinism, as Colson does, then Vandover as a character does seem to challenge the principles of hard heredity. As Colson contends, Vandover’s degradation *is* precipitated by social discourse—his inner brute awakens in boyhood when he cross references the “vague and strange ideas” about women he finds in the Bible with the clinical prose of an encyclopedia entry on “Obstetrics”—and *is* hastened by competition for scarce resources—he

loses property and money to his lifelong friend, Charlie Geary, whose professional and social climbing are motivated by a ruthless social Darwinism celebrated in his creed, “the weakest to the wall, the strongest to the front” (Norris, “Vandover” 6–8, 242). As the Harvard educated son of a real estate developer, Vandover also seems to possess evolutionary advantages, including “pliability,” that, “according to the era’s social Darwinian ethos...should insure success” yet do not (Colson 40). Thus, Colson reads Vandover’s capitulation to external stimuli as an “inversion” of evolutionary discourse by which Norris “challenges the pseudo-scientific application of natural selection to the social world by constructing a character that *becomes* unfit, which is different than saying he *is* unfit” (40, original emphasis). As the proto-eugenic discourse of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries makes clear, however, no fixed boundary separates external forces from internal defects, and naturalistic fiction textualizes this mode of human disqualification by similarly representing non-normative responses to the environment as material signs of the subject’s in-built inferiority.

In order to become unfit in naturalist fiction, one must already be unfit. In the novel, Norris deploys biopolitical aesthetics to illustrate this *a priori* in two contrasting ways. First, he uses a recurring set of descriptions to imply that Vandover’s devolution is already anticipated by his physical appearance as a teenager; second, Vandover and his male friends interpret the superficial physical and aesthetic characteristics of lower-class women as symptoms of inherent moral failings that justify misogynistic treatment. During his youth, Vandover’s body—as well as his interests and activities—portend a life predisposed to ruin. As a boy of fifteen who had not yet acquired the “knowledge of good and evil” from Biblical and encyclopedic study, Vandover receives the nickname “‘Skinny-seldom-fed,’ to his infinite humiliation,” for he “had grown too fast...his limbs were straight, angular, all out of proportion, with huge articulations at the elbows

and knees. His neck was long and thin and his head large, his face sallow and covered with pimples, his ears were big, red and stuck out stiff from either side of his head” (“Vandover” 7). Marked by lack of aesthetic beauty during his “uncanny period,” Vandover also manifests such non-normative, antisocial tendencies as disliking girls and indulging “the strangest and most morbid fancies” (“Vandover” 7). The nickname returns as Vandover approaches the furthest depth of his descent after more than a decade of dissipation, presenting symptoms of *Lycanthropy-Pathesis* and tertiary syphilis.⁷⁶ Visiting Vandover in his rented rooms, Charlie Geary tells him, ““You look all frazzled out, all pale around the wattles. Never saw you looking so bad; you ought to be more careful, Van; there’ll be a smash some time. You keep on getting thin like you have for the past few days and I’ll have to be calling you Skinny Seldom-fed again” (“Vandover” 191). This pair of references suggests a version of orthogenetic recapitulation theory, meaning the belief that human development rehearses the evolutionary

⁷⁶ Following Howard (1985) and Pizer (1986), Christine Harvey King argues that the symptoms attributed to *Lycanthropy-Pathesis* are not evidence of the supernatural but are consistent with late stage or tertiary syphilis. The effort to explain the novel’s lycanthropy itself frames the significance of disability in literary naturalism (and critical interpretations of it). Because a gothic explanation such as lycanthropy threatens to dismantle the presumed project of naturalism, meaning its quest for accuracy and truth, the supernatural transformations that Vandover endures must be explained away by clinical diagnosis. Vandover is *really* syphilitic, critics like King and Gary Richard Thompson (2012) assure us, and his experience of hyperbolically enlarged hands and feet (both symptoms of tertiary syphilis) is *actually* yet another neurologic symptom that causes him to hallucinate and misperceive the otherwise banal symptomology of his disease. Viewed in this way, disability appears as a stable object capable of delivering a fixed and easily legible meaning. Of course, disability—especially syphilis, known as a “great imitator” in a clinical context due to its ability to present symptoms associated with a vast array of physical and neurological conditions—offers no such stability. Instead of black boxing Vandover’s lycanthropy through medical diagnosis or legitimizing it as the eruption of a Romantic figure in an otherwise naturalistic text (Link 201), one needs to ask what figural uses Norris makes of syphilis and disability more broadly. After all, the term “lycanthropy” *does* appear in the context of a medical diagnosis provided by a physician. King notes that the term used in the diagnosis appears inconsistently across various editions of the novel: the Library of America edition (1986), edited by Pizer, uses the term “*Lycanthropy-Pathesis*,” while all previous editions of the novel use “*Lycanthropy-Mathesis*.” While King is content to point out this discrepancy, the terms have profoundly different implications for understanding the figurative freight of this disabling condition. “Pathesis” (from the Greek *patho-*, meaning “suffering or disease,” and *-esis*, meaning “state, condition or process”) suggests that Vandover experiences an individual state of suffering, while “mathesis” suggests a universal condition—perhaps akin to an orthogenetic evolutionary fate—by invoking “*Mathesis universalis*,” the hypothetical universal science first suggested by René Descartes and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in the 16th and 17th centuries.

history of the species (Bowler 19),⁷⁷ in that Vandover's repeated debauches hasten his return to an early, immature stage of development that renders him unfit in his environment. The novel provides a parallel illustration of the cyclical degradation of recapitulation in the death of Vandover's mother, Hallie, who expires due to the rigors of westward travel and whose body at the moment of death blooms with images of atavistic regression: "her face became the face of an imbecile, stupid, without expression, her eyes half-closed, her mouth half-open. Her head rolled forward as though she were nodding in her sleep, while a long drip of saliva trailed from her lower lip" ("Vandover" 4). While Hallie's death certainly suggests that Vandover's own constitutional deficits proceed from a flawed familial heritage, her atavistic regression also emblemizes a universal nearness to bare animality shared by all humans.

Vandover and the Brute adds further nuance to the concept of disqualification due to biopolitical aesthetics by suggesting that these criteria also structure interactions between men and women. The young men in the novel—excepting Dolliver Haight—use aesthetic criteria to justify the disqualification and mistreatment of women they judge to be lower class.⁷⁸ While attending Harvard, Vandover learns to distinguish women who deserve non-virtuous treatment from those who do not. As he sits with Geary, his roommate, in their window-seat doing schoolwork, Geary begins "laughing and pounding on the window" to attract the attention of two women who pass ("Vandover" 16). Vandover protests what he sees as Geary's insulting behavior, but Geary dismisses his concerns, saying "Do you think they're nice girls? Just take a

⁷⁷ Recapitulation theory was used as a neo-Lamarckian tool to justify racism and white domination—the theory typically suggests that the human embryo, not the adult person as I argue regarding Vandover, passes through the evolutionary history of its specific race, not of its species. Thus, by classifying certain external and superficial physical traits common found in non-white communities as primitive, the *fin-de-siècle* proponents of neo-Lamarckism justified the subordination of non-white people (Bowler 19).

⁷⁸ As a young boy Vandover sees women as the proverbial Victorian "Angels in the House," and this belief is one of the "first illusions" destroyed when he acquires knowledge of sex (Norris, "Vandover" 8). Although this knowledge allows his "innate vice" to awaken, he remains virtuous and respectful toward women of all social classes until he matriculates at Harvard.

look at them” (“Vandover” 16, original emphasis). Geary uses aesthetic criteria to determine that these women are lower class—they are “cheaply and showily dressed. One of them wore a mannish shirtwaist, with a high collar and scarf. The other had taken off her gloves and was swinging a bright red cape in one of her bare hands” (“Vandover” 16)—and his classist assumptions justify (to him) the women’s disqualification and his indecorous treatment. When Vandover encounters these same girls later in the evening, he is initially excited by the novelty of the mixed social encounter, but soon “the hopeless vulgarity of the girl at his side, her tawdry clothes, her sordid, petty talk, her slang, her miserable profanity...began to revolt him” (“Vandover” 17).

When he returns to San Francisco he justifies acting on his sexual urges by associating these aesthetic details with a “class of women who are not to know one’s last name or address, and whose hate and love are equally to be dreaded” (“Vandover” 38). Because he “respond[s] instantly to anything sensuously attractive,” Vandover continues to pursue women of this “class” for sex although he is all but betrothed to Turner Ravis, a daughter of “one of the best families of the city” (“Vandover” 39, 59). Ravis rejects Vandover after he impregnates Ida Hayes, a woman whose lack of virtue is similarly forecast by aesthetic criteria. Not a prostitute like Flossie, whose own aesthetic disqualification is written on a “face [that bears] the unmistakable traces of a ruined virtue and a vanished innocence,” Ida “belong[s] to a certain type of young girl that was common in the city,” meaning she frequents public social events like baseball games and the Mechanics’ Fair, she “drink[s] California champagne,” and she “loves to have a ‘gay’ time,” benign activities and preferences that nevertheless mark her as a devalued object to be used for sexual gratification, not a subject in her own right (Norris, “Vandover” 38, 50). Ida’s role in the novel demonstrates the all-encompassing disqualification of women in the emergent urban

culture at the end of the century, for her meaninglessness to Vandover is homologous to her meaninglessness to her father and, one could argue, to the narrator. As Gina M. Rossetti suggests, Ida's father sues Vandover not to defend Ida's virtue posthumously but to raise enough capital to buy out his business partner in a carpet cleaning company, effectively commodifying his daughter's death and replacing familial virtue with the ethos of capitalist accumulation (45). I would extend this indifference to the narrator (if not the novelist), for whom Ida exists solely to commit suicide, the public act that discloses Vandover's private depravity and triggers the series of environmental changes that speed his devolution. Like a typical disabled character in normative fiction, Ida is narratively useful only insofar as she propels the actions of the protagonist and, having achieved her purpose, is eliminated altogether from the narrative.

The narrator's sense of hereditary determinism and social influence are misogynistic, of course, for women are "born with natural intuitive purity" that they must "make an effort" to betray, while men possess a "coarser masculine fibre" that always threatens to erupt during unguarded moments ("Vandover" 75, 35). In this simplistic gendered ontology, women act crudely by design—which justifies their callous treatment by men—while men must exert tremendous effort to act with decency—which excuses their frequent brutal indulgences. Vandover and the young men in his social circle demonstrate "good breeding and delicacy" while in the company of upper class young women at the home of Turner Ravis, for example, but we learn that manners are only a counterfeit of instinctive taste and good breeding that masks the brutal substrate from which man is made ("Vandover" 35). Once the party ends and the men retire to a private room at The Imperial, a "fast café" that facilitates class mixing, "their manners changed: they lounged clumsily upon their seats, their legs stretched out, their waistcoats unbuttoned, caring only to be at their ease. Their talk and manners became blunt, rude,

unconstrained,” and they enjoy the company of Flossie (“Vandover” 35, 38). This gruff behavior is not presented as a point of hypermasculine pride, however, but as a precondition for the wholesale degeneration of men. Without a positive “feminine influence” to check the “instinct of a young brute,” the self-indulgent Vandover slides “downward till he should have reached the last stages of idiocy” (Norris, “Vandover” 180).

Although Vandover certainly undergoes degradation or devolution, he is not necessarily unfit in a Darwinian sense. According to Darwin’s theory of natural selection, environmental changes eliminate those who cannot adapt, and they select those who can. While Vandover may suffer a social death when he is eliminated from the social milieu to which he originally belongs, his pliability allows him to adapt to a range of progressively more debilitating sets of environmental circumstances: the boy who dreams of a lifetime making art effortlessly “rearrange[s] himself” and “become[s] to all outward appearances a typical Harvardian” (13); a graduate, he returns to San Francisco and “assume[s] the manner of these young men of the city” (21); he proves capable of reproduction, although Ida kills herself before the baby is born (76); expelled from his social circle, he goes into temporary exile where he actually *survives a shipwreck* (101-2); in the wake of his “three great catastrophes (132), he satisfies himself with “animal pleasures” (135) of eating and drinking; he *survives a suicide attempt* (183); he develops “*Lycanthropy-Pathesis*,” which causes him to act like a wolf, but he learns to keep the wolf at bay (203); and, at the novel’s conclusion he becomes a day laborer (250) after he loses his inheritance and artistic ability. In short, Vandover *survives*; he adapts to dramatically changing circumstances; he seemingly cannot be killed either by technological disaster or his own hand; and even if we grant that poverty and a life of work represent degradation—which I am not so quick to do—Vandover is, frankly, fit from a Darwinian standpoint. Yet in the world of the

novel, Vandover clearly illustrates degeneracy and maladaptation. The question remains, by what mechanism or measure?

Biopolitical Citizenship in Edith Wharton's *Sanctuary*

Edith Wharton's *Sanctuary* engages the naturalist thematic in each of the novella's two parts to develop distinct approaches to the debate between deterministic heredity and free will. While the first section examines the ethics of biopolitical citizenship by focusing on the decision-making process of Kate Orme, who must choose whether or not to continue her engagement to a fiancé who possesses (what seems to her) a heritable moral flaw, the second section dramatizes the conflict between theories of hard and soft determinism by narrating Kate's attempts to nullify her adult son's inherited moral defects through environmental influence and emphasizing aesthetic taste as an instrument by which fitness can be measured.⁷⁹ The first part develops a representation of newly articulated social responsibilities of motherhood, for we see Kate make choices concerning marriage and procreation based not on love or desire but on her sense of responsibility to the state as a biopolitical citizen. In this section, Wharton acknowledges the contemporary belief that disabled people possess a hyper-sexuality (Snyder and Mitchell 86) that must be regulated, although she re-orientes the object to a male subject instead of a female. The second part registers an ambivalent argument on behalf of free will that asserts that people *can* resist their biological imperatives and predispositions even though doing so may be disadvantageous in a broader culture that otherwise chooses not to do so. Dick, Kate's son, ultimately chooses an ethical mode of conduct that nullifies his economic, romantic, and

⁷⁹ Wharton was well read in evolutionary theory through the friendly influence of Egerton Winthrop, and this knowledge brought an "overwhelming sense of cosmic vastness...into our little geocentric universe" (*Backward* 94). She writes, "it was [Winthrop] who gave me Wallace's 'Darwin and Darwinism', and 'The Origin of Species', and made known to me Huxley, Spencer, Romanes, Haeckel, Westermarck, and the various popular exponents of the great evolutionary movement" (*Backward* 94).

procreative opportunities in an urban American culture that has cast those ethical values aside. The novella leaves open the question as to which causal philosophy—mastering one’s desires and acting in an ethical way or serving one’s desires in an anti-social way—might best serve American subjects at the turn of the twentieth century.

A major thematic focus in both parts of the novella is the exploration of biopolitical citizenship during a period of scientific and economic transformation preoccupied with the effects of non-desirable heritable identities. “Biopolitical citizenship,” a term coined by Stephen Epstein, refers to a broad class of biomedical, political, and personal phenomena that frames the biology of populations as the grounds on which claims for rights and sociopolitical agency are made (21). Nikolas Rose and Carlos Novas describe “biological citizenship” as grounded in the “beliefs about the [legitimate] biological existence of human beings, as individuals, as families and lineages, as communities, as population and races, and as a species” (Rose and Novas 440). The ethical dilemmas in *Sanctuary* dramatize the negotiation of biological citizenship at each of these levels: Kate believes that Denis Peyton, her fiancée, possesses a heritable moral defect when she learns that he has acted unethically in the management of his deceased half-brother’s estate, and thus she perceives him as a spoiled human being; Denis’s moral defect is seemingly attributable to a flawed familial lineage that proceeds from an unethical mother and includes a half-brother who dies from dissipation, leaving an unrecognized wife and child behind; Kate recognizes that Denis’s will inevitably pass his pathogenic qualities into the national stock whether or not she agrees to marry him, so she decides to marry him so that she might use her environmental influence might nullify his negative impact; and Dick, Kate’s son, must decide whether or not to secure his professional and romantic futures through an unethical act of self-

serving dishonesty or to effectively foreclose those futures by adhering to an ethical code that no longer seems operative for modern American subjects.

The criteria that Kate uses in her evaluation of Denis's fitness for marriage and procreation is geared toward determining his "biogitimacy," Didier Fassin's term for the state of having one's life judged as possessing the requisite "meaning and values" that are worth promoting to biological citizenship and, thus, enfolded into the collective (48–9, 52). In Part I, this decision-making process takes the form of a dialectic between philosophies of causality, with Kate adopting a materialist approach after being disabused of her earlier providential outlook and Denis basing his fitness on the esteem of his family name instead of the actions he performs. When Kate learns that Denis has committed perjury to prevent his dead step-brother's estate from passing to his wife from a secret marriage, an act that causes Arthur Peyton's inheritance to flow instead to Denis, Kate realizes she had been living "like some captive brought up in a windowless palace whose painted walls she takes for the actual world" in her abiding sense of life as morally just (*Sanctuary* 22). Denis's perjury, compounded by the murder-suicide committed by Arthur's widow, teaches Kate that material reality more often manifests as an "awful coil of moral darkness" (*Sanctuary* 22), and she brings this materialist perspective that links behaviors to internal qualities to bear on her adjudication of Denis's fitness. Conversely, Denis perceives his fitness as issuing from his family name, not his own or his family's actions, a belief that he communicates when he scolds Kate for the nature of her love for him: "It's because I'm moral and respectable, and all that, that you're fond of me...you're simply in love with my virtues" (*Sanctuary* 27). While Denis is desperate to preserve a sense of self that exists separately from his actions, Kate behaves in a manner consistent with the proto-eugenic thought in the early 1900s, seeing no distinction between what Denis does and who he materially is,

assuming that the former simply reveals the latter. Like a eugenics fieldworker herself, she interprets Denis's unethical and amoral act as a symptom of an inherent flaw in his "moral fibre" (*Sanctuary* 65) that she feels he can neither suppress nor purge, while Denis denies any correlation between unethical behavior and his own sense of self. Her assessment seems validated by his spendthrift ways during their seven years of marriage and by his early death—Denis might behave inappropriately, his early demise seems to say, but his flaw proceeds from his very nature and deserves elimination.

If the bestowal of biological citizenship appears as a form of social inclusion, its dependence on biological differentiation establishes it as a form of exclusion. As Sarah Morando Lakhani and Stefan Timmermans argue, biopolitical citizenship exposes the roles of biomedical gatekeepers and technological artifacts—from routine tests to rehabilitative or prosthetic devices—in "initiating, reproducing, and transforming practices of social stratification that produce inclusion and exclusion" (361). According to this logic, Denis is marked as disabled and his negative heritable quality (such as it is) appears as a threat to the national stock. Disabled people have been effectively denied citizenship when biopolitical criteria are used to exclude them from full socio-economic and civil participation in their communities; when physical or ideological barriers prevent access to spaces, resources, or opportunities; and when the effects of this subjugation inhibit disabled people's sense of belonging. Although the legal understanding of citizenship rests on the methods used by governments and states to include subjects on whom rights and responsibilities are then bestowed, the nature of citizenship as construed by the social sciences also "includes active civic and political participation ... and a sense of social belonging" (Sarah Morando Lakhani and Stefan Timmermans 362). Biopolitical exclusion from full

citizenship produces affective subjective responses that alter one's own relationship to oneself just as it delimits access to rights and resources.

Kate's ultimate decision to marry Denis in order to contain or eliminate his heritable fault is consistent with a notion of biopolitical citizenship that actively excludes some aspirants as it levies demands on those it includes. The enactment of these biopolitical diagnostic, classificatory, and rehabilitative practices "from above," meaning by the state on individual subjects or populations, often extend beyond the conferral of rights to the presumption of "citizenship *duties*" (190, original emphasis), meaning that recognition as a biopolitical citizen also bequeaths a range of new expectations for individual conduct. Although Kate could rightfully break her engagement, she decides to marry Denis out of a virtual sense of maternal responsibility drawn directly from early positive eugenic thought, seeing herself as a valuable agent of statist reproductive ends. Kate marries Denis so that her "protecting maternity" could negate the "hidden physical taint" that he will bequeath to his offspring (*Sanctuary* 65–6). In this regard, Kate's decision appears consistent with turn-of-the-century conceptions of biopolitical maternal responsibility in issues of heredity. Martin S. Pernick writes:

Attributing something to heredity meant holding the parents morally responsible for having caused it, not necessarily specifying the technical mechanism through which parental responsibility operated. By this definition of heredity, eugenics meant not just having good genes but also being a good parent, raising good children, or promoting good health for future generations. (1769)

By basing her decision on her reproductive responsibilities, Kate acts as an "ethical pioneer," Nikolas Rose and Carlos Novas's term for a subject who "pioneer[s] a new informed ethics of the self—a set of techniques for managing everyday life in relation to a condition, and in relation

to expert knowledge” (450).⁸⁰ Responding to a biopolitical threat articulated “from above” by a coalition of medical doctors, scientists, and government officials, Kate decides to manage Denis’s condition in an act of altruistic citizen activism that subordinates her own personal desires to her sense of duty as a biopolitical citizen. Although she reaches a “mystic climax of effacement” when she considers the selflessness of her role as biopolitical steward (*Sanctuary* 67), whether or not Kate herself even desires a child remains unclear.

Although Part I does not demonstrate this, biological citizenship can function as a form of resistance when mobilized “from below,” which is to say it can be used a basis for group solidarity in order to make claims for rights and access to resources being withheld by the state on biopolitical grounds (Rose and Novas 446). Following Epstein, Sarah Morando Lakhani and Stefan Timmermans define biopolitical citizenship also as “a mode of *claiming* rights that individuals may take vis-à-vis the state” (361, original emphasis). While full rights are tacitly granted to able-bodied subjects in the U.S. context, certain groups of non-normatively embodied subjects can be granted the same rights (or provided equal access to resources) typically after they have established their biolegitimacy, been classified according to their perceived biovalue, and accepted into a biomedical regime. This phenomenon is illustrated in contemporary U.S. history by the disability rights movement, whose biopolitically-based claims lead to prominent civil rights legislation, notably the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, as well as the efforts of women, racial minorities, and people with HIV-AIDS to be included in medical research in the late-twentieth century.

⁸⁰ Rose and Novas draw on Rayna Rapp’s concept of “moral pioneer,” meaning those whose diagnosis with an illness or condition inspire them to reconsider their own responsibilities to family members, biomedical professionals, and broader community members. This reconsider ultimately leads to novel ways of relating to themselves in these contexts. See Rapp, *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: the Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America* (Routledge, 1999).

In Part II of the novella, the drama builds to an ultimate test for Dick Peyton, Kate and Denis's son, that demonstrates the limits of hard heredity when checked by the soft determinism of maternal influence. Desperate to win a museum design competition and, therefore, the hand of Clemence Verney in marriage, Dick decides not to submit the architectural plans of his deceased friend, Paul Darrow, as his own even though Darrow urges him to do so in a posthumously delivered letter. Darrow's completed drawings are so "wonderful" that they cause Dick to lament that his own "are not worth bothering with" (*Sanctuary* 119, 120), and in his own professional failure he perceives a string of future failures—most notably the impossibility of marrying Clemence and the losses that entails—that will shuffle him to the margins of New York society. Although Dick ultimately acts ethically, one cannot say with any conviction that he has escaped his heredity, for the novella frames Dick's choice not as an act of self-will but as a triumph of maternal influence over his pernicious heredity and a social milieu organized by social Darwinist principles. When Dick "lean[s] his head against [Kate's] shoulder like a boy" in the novel's final scene, he admits to being "an abysmally weak fool" and claims that if his mother "had let go an instant I should have gone under—and that if I'd gone down I should never have come up again alive" (*Sanctuary* 184).⁸¹ Dick's timidity casts doubt on whether he can be counted on to act ethically when the next crisis presents itself and, more problematically, whether ethical action is the right action in emergent New York society at all. The novella's closing tableau leaves unanswered the question as to whether or not Dick's self-mastery of his inherent "taint" sacrifices personal benefit for the sake of the greater species by removing him from the gene

⁸¹ Dick's pathetic admission dramatizes the stakes assigned to positive eugenic practices of good breeding, best summarized by Charles Darwin in *The Descent of Man* (1871): "a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other men of the same tribe, yet that an advancement in the standard of morality and an increase in the number of well-endowed men will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another" (157).

pool or if, in fact, it is the “taint” that would make him fit for a cosmopolitan world developing according to the self-serving views of capital.

The novella leaves undecided which causal philosophy is ultimately operative: Denis swears that he himself was powerless to resist his nature, yet Kate’s environmental influence is able not only to curb his potential unethical behavior but also to successfully remove his inherited taint from the reproductive pool. Possessing an innate tendency toward self-interested behavior, Denis does act ethically after all. This final ambiguity, just as in *Vandover and the Brute*, begs the question: in what way precisely is Dick Peyton unfit?

The Biopolitical Aesthetics of Bad Taste

Both Vandover and Dick Peyton have bad taste. In the naturalist thematic, a lack of aesthetic sense appears often as not as a symptom of disability according to the regnant tradition of disembodied aesthetics. In the eighteenth century, David Hume defined “taste” as an exercise of reason that reclaims discrimination from the affective response of gross sentiment (“Standard” 138–9). For Hume, taste is the material-semiotic product of superior culture and non-disabled bodies: the “standard of taste” represents a consensual judgment between men who have contemplated a great many aesthetic objects and who possess “superiority of their faculties above the rest of mankind” (“Standard” 140, 149). Despite his acknowledgements that varieties of taste persist within groups of similarly acculturated people and that aesthetic standards are socially determined, Hume offers an essentialist sense of aesthetic not a democratic one. Only the fittest “men,” meaning those who possess the subtlest “sense organs,” achieve the most subtle aesthetic refinements and can function as arbiters of taste, and some objects of perception possess qualities that “are fitted by nature to produce...particular feelings” of beauty and deformity (“Standard” 141). Hume likewise concedes that “organs of internal sensation are

seldom so perfect as to allow the general principles their full play” (“Standard” 147), yet the near universality of sensual impediments does not clear ground for an aesthetic program that includes difference. The overwhelming variability of human sense organs only heightens the value of those whose “organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition” (“Standard” 140). Given the biological substrate for aesthetic experience, if a person fails to appreciate beauty in an object consensually understood as beautiful, the lack of recognition originates in “some defect or imperfection in the [sensory] organ” that encounters the object (“Standard” 140). According to Hume’s estimation, a lack of taste is a symptom of disability—“in each creature there is a sound and a defective state,” he writes, “and the former alone can be supposed to afford us a true standard of taste and sentiment” (“Standard” 140)—and his aesthetic project implicitly condemns otherwise disabled people, particularly those with impaired “organs of internal sensations,” to lives of aesthetic impoverishment. Perpetually entombed in a defective state, disabled people cannot rely upon their imperfect organs to register the full measure of an object’s sensual power nor can they sustain them thorough comparisons necessary to the achievement of reasoned judgment.

For Hume, aesthetics serves a proper socio-political function, for delicacy of taste is a requisite component of an ideal subject (“Delicacy” 10). By cultivating a delicacy of taste, men “of learning and reflection” can temper their inherent ardors and develop discernment appropriate for the proper conduct of life (“Delicacy” 10). The development of taste elevates one above the “mere men of the world,” who are excluded from the social vicissitudes afforded by taste, and renders one fit to join “the company of a few select companions” who recognize “how much all the rest of mankind fall short” (“Delicacy” 13, 12). Those without taste are liable to succumb to an in-built “delicacy of passion,” Hume’s term for an overabundance of sensibility,

that causes them “to be transported beyond all bounds of prudence and discretion, and to take false steps in the conduct of life, which are often irretrievable, and prohibit the exercise of full self-determination (“Delicacy” 10). Hume allows that the in-built affliction of bad taste may be “cure[d]” through the conscious development of reasoned aesthetic judgment,” but the cure—as should seem self-evident at this point—depends on the subject having an exemplary body (“Delicacy” 11). Only those subjects with “organs [that] are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them” can develop the highest degrees of aesthetic judgment (“Delicacy” 11). The social implications for those whose sensory organs exhibit impairment need not be stated, but the disqualification from full socio-economic participation afforded to biopolitical citizens may be least of them.

In *Vandover the Brute* and *Sanctuary*, the naturalist thematic often engages the philosophical debate on determinism using these aesthetic arguments as a conduit. Although he possesses technical gifts as an artist, Vandover lacks a delicacy of taste to guide his appetites and restrain the overactive delicacy of sentiment that makes him susceptible to all forms of sensual gratification. In *The Fiction of Frank Norris* (1978), Don Graham denies any connection between descriptions of bad taste and representations of unethical conduct (34), yet he does not acknowledge that aesthetic choices act as markers of social class (Rossetti 43) or, I would add, disability status. Gina M. Rossetti rightly points out that Vandover’s artistic dilettantism reveals a “lack of seriousness,” but she extrapolates his indolence—“it bored him to work very hard, and when he did not enjoy his work he stopped at once” (“Vandover” 47)—into a false claim that he possesses little to no artistic competence (Rossetti 41). Likewise, Christine Harvey King groups Vandover with other pseudo-artistic “bunglers” that populate Norris’s fiction and argues that these figures invoke humor and invite mockery to legitimate the seriousness of naturalistic

aesthetic practice (15). While I agree with both King and Rossetti that Norris's fiction eviscerates middle- and low-brow aesthetic objects and beliefs in order to champion the aesthetic practice of naturalism, I resist the claim that Vandover has no fluency with artistic media and the idea that he is necessarily laughable because of it. Vandover's predilection for melodramatic art is a combined effect of his flawed heredity and environmental influence, one that highlights the importance of aesthetic taste in the conduct of a range of presumably non-aesthetic areas of lived experience. Vandover is not a failed artist because he cannot sketch or paint: he is a failed artist because he is incapable of selecting appropriate subjects or producing tasteful treatments of them. His limitations are aesthetic, and these shortcomings predispose him to mismanage his life and undergo regression.

For Vandover, art initially functions as a prosthetic that mitigates the absence of a feminine influence in his life and provides preliminary standards that encourage the development of his best civic self. Without the early development of his "artistic side," the narrator explains, Vandover "might have been totally corrupted while in his earliest teens" ("Vandover" 9). Far from being an untalented enthusiast, Vandover displays aptitude across a range of media, as the narrator informs us: "In a suitable environment Vandover might easily have become an author, actor or musician, since it was evident that he possessed the fundamental *afflatus* that underlies all branches of art" ("Vandover" 9, original emphasis). This early description of his aptitudes seems in earnest when compared to the obviously ironic praise given to Vandover's later aesthetic choices, especially those for "The Last Enemy," his long-planned melodramatic "masterpiece, his salon picture should he get to Paris. A British cavalryman and his horse, both dying of thirst and wounds, were to be lost on a Soudanese desert, and in the middle distance... a lion should be drawing in upon them" ("Vandover" 47). Before one mocks Vandover for his

taste, it is important to remember that his aesthetic education is curtailed through no fault of his own but by “the merest chance” (“Vandover” 9).⁸² Vandover’s earliest exposure to visual art comes through a popular gift book filled with melodramatic drawings of sad and lonely women, while his German drawing teacher emphasizes the banal Biedermeier style and trains him to copy.⁸³ These influences establish a conspicuously (and pointedly) lowbrow aesthetic sensibility upon which additional education at Beaux Arts in Paris is meant to build.⁸⁴ Vandover’s father, the Old Gentleman, fears that Paris would expose his son to “every temptation” (“Vandover” 11), so he discontinues Vandover’s aesthetic development by enrolling him in Harvard. Ironically, Vandover’s collegiate experiences introduce him to the same sordid practices that the Old Gentleman hopes he will avoid, and by depriving Vandover the opportunity to develop a delicacy of taste based on reasoned judgment, the Old Gentleman eliminates a potential bulwark against those very vices (“Vandover” 12).⁸⁵

⁸² By ascribing Vandover’s aesthetic fate to chance, Norris establishes a parallel between Vandover and Dolly Haight, whose own ruin comes through a series of unrelated coincidences. At a party given by Turner Ravis, Dolly accidentally sips from a broken glass, cutting his lip; later that evening, he is kissed by Flossie in an act meant to humiliate him do to his obvious discomfort in her presence. From the coincidence of these two events, Dolly develops tertiary syphilis, which causes Turner Ravis to abandon him just as she had abandoned Vandover. The reader sympathizes with Dolly, and the similar “chance” occurrence that frames Vandover’s fate ought to generate a measure of sympathy for his young self, too.

⁸³ Derived from the satirical nom de plume “Gottlieb Biedermeier,”⁸³ the Biedermeier style signified art that celebrated common life, such as family portraiture, and common objects, such as landscapes and still lives, before becoming a pejorative label in the late 19th century (Clarke and Clarke). Like the aesthetic practices of literary naturalism, the Biedermeier style serves as an aesthetic coping mechanism for a culture undergoing radical, comprehensive transformation. The rise of Biedermeier preceded the unification of the German Empire in 1871, a geopolitical event marked by the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the former German Confederation. By offering an image of “deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 7), these fictional, constructed, and composite identities buttress emergent (thus fragile) forms of nationalism.

⁸⁴ In Norris’s *The Pit* (1903), the academic style associated with *École des Beaux-arts* is itself subject for aesthetic ridicule when Sheldon Cottrell, the stained glass artist, criticizes the Jadwins’ painting by William Bouguereau, who himself was Norris’s art instructor from 1877 to 1879 (McElrath and Crisler 26).

⁸⁵ Even had he attended *Beaux-arts*, Vandover’s acquisition of subtle aesthetic sense is not assured. Given that both the Old Gentleman and Hallie, his mother, die suddenly due to a “sudden shock” and the rigors of train travel, respectively, Vandover has likely inherited unsound organs that are incapable of sensing the subtleties of great art (Norris, “Vandover” 113, 4; Hume, “Standard” 140). The narrator states as much by claiming that “portrait work and the power to catch subtle intellectual distinctions in a face were sometimes beyond him” (“Vandover” 48).

Choosing as his pastimes lowbrow, brutish, and presumptively masculine activities of lower complexity, Vandover exercises the pliability symptomatic of a delicacy of passion and illustrates the characteristic intersection of material and semiotic differences understood as symptoms of heritable unfitness commonly associated with “feble-mindedness.” Because Vandover does not recognize a standard of taste, he receives sensual gratification in equal measure from high- and low-cultural objects, and this aesthetic pliability precipitates his degradation. Hume argues that taste restrains one’s base appetites, writing that “when a man is possessed of that talent [for delicacy of taste], he is more happy by what pleases his taste, than by what gratifies his appetite” (“Delicacy” 11).⁸⁶ Taste ought to limit one’s social sphere to a “few people, and mak[e] us indifferent to the company and conversation of the greater part of men” as it renders “many things, which please or afflict others...too frivolous to engage our attention” (“Delicacy” 11, 12). Vandover, however, moves inconstantly through male friends and female sexual partners. Although the novel does not simply rehearse the conservative sexual mores of Victorian culture, Vandover’s sexual practices do illustrate the devolutionary danger in the indiscriminate satisfaction of appetite in the absence of taste:

It was the sensitive artist nature in him that responded instantly to anything sensuously attractive. Each kind and class of beautiful women could arouse in Vandover passions of equal force, though of a far different kind. Turner Ravis influenced him upon his best side, calling out in him all that was cleanest, finest, and most delicate. Flossie appealed only to the animal and the beast in him, the evil, hideous brute that made instant answer. (“Vandover” 39)

⁸⁶ Norris offers a crude illustration of this proposition through Charlie Geary’s continual praise of the size, not quality, of his steaks.

He loses his romantic and social prospects by indulging his excessive sexuality first with Flossie, from whom he contracts syphilis, and most significantly with Ida Wade, who commits suicide after becoming pregnant. After he is sued by Mr. Hayes, cheated by Geary, and socially ruined when this information is dispersed through the society he frequents, Vandover fully embraces his base appetites, squandering his inheritance on food, drink, and the thrill of high-stakes card playing: repetitive, low-complexity behaviors that trigger the development of deviant acquired characteristics. Ultimately his continued aesthetic devolution puts so much stress on his “crisping nerves” that he is diagnosed with “*Lycanthropy-Pathesis*,” a pseudo-scientific condition that causes his hands and head to grow and his voice to become a mere growl, while he scurries about on all fours (“Vandover” 203–5). Through repeated failures of taste and discernment, Vandover *becomes* “Wolf.” Yet the final image in the novel—a ruined Vandover, reduced to refurbishing rental properties that are built upon land that he had once owned but lost, kneels on the floor before a small boy who looks down upon him while chewing buttered bread—is itself ambiguous: Vandover, a broken day laborer, appears as a curiosity before a boy whose future actions may or may not allow him to escape the clutches of his own “masculine fibre” (“Vandover” 260, 35). The message is clear: if Vandover were to be guided by good taste, he would conduct his life in an ethical, decorous manner that would lead away from the Imperial bar and toward a respectable marriage to Turner Ravis. Incapable of so doing, he is lost.

In *Vandover and the Brute*, if Norris offers the cultivation of aesthetic taste as a prosthetic capable of offsetting hereditary inferiority, Edith Wharton binds hereditary fitness with aesthetic capacity and offers maternal influence as a corrective to those conjoined defects. *Sanctuary* takes for granted the link between behavior and deterministic heredity, yet leaves open the possibility that environmental influence can shape acquired characteristics. The pair of

ethical crises, Kate's and Dick's, in the novella explore multiple approaches to the process of social disqualification as they gauge the effects of Kate's maternal influence on inbuilt moral weakness. While Part I of the novel demonstrates Denis's disqualification of lower class women, an act that triggers his disqualification for moral inconstancy in Kate's estimation and her assumption of role of "ethical pioneer," Part II most explicitly foregrounds aesthetic taste as a measure of genetic fitness and a predictor of future accomplishments through Dick's attempt to win an architectural design contest.

While the resolution of Dick's ethical conflict has drawn what little critical attention the novella has generated—R. W. B. Lewis affords the novella a single paragraph in his massive, Pulitzer Prize winning biography so that he might describe it as "a relatively undistinguished piece of fiction" (123)—I would like to focus on the major condition for the crisis's possibility: architect trained at *Beaux Arts*, Dick has inferior aesthetic taste. Like Vandover, Dick suffers because he has not developed a delicacy of taste or internalized a common standard, and this deficiency appears as part of his paternal inheritance. As a younger man, "Dick had troubled [his mother] by a superabundance of tastes, a restless flitting from one form of artistic expression to another" typically motivated by "any depreciation of his work" (*Sanctuary* 77). Just as Vandover refuses to work when the going becomes difficult, Dick creates art as long as its reception remains uniformly positive.⁸⁷ As a symptom of overactive sensibility, Dick's artistic inconstancy marks him as incapable of developing the highest aesthetic taste that can only come from making strenuous comparative judgments between similar objects (Hume, "Delicacy" 144). In possession of a delicacy of passion, not taste, Dick exhibits "enthusiasms and...disdains...alike too unqualified for that happy mean of character which is the best defence against the surprises

⁸⁷ The novella does not make clear how Dick's inability to handle critique affects his experience at *Beaux Arts*, which emphasizes competition through its various salons and associated prizes.

of fortune” and that distinguishes ideal subjects (Wharton, *Sanctuary* 79). As Kate worries over Dick’s eventual decision, she invests his every word and action, as well as his silences and inactions, with portent, and the sight of him produces “some long-effaced impression.... She did not, at first, know what had produced the effect; then she saw that it was his likeness to his father” (*Sanctuary* 117). From Kate’s point of view, the external pressures of this ethical-aesthetic dilemma emphasize the physical similarities between son and father by triggering Dick’s inherited taint, and one assumes that she sees Dick also in an “unmitigated glare” that conforms his own appearance to the ugliness of incipient immorality. When Kate queries him regarding the possibility of losing the competition and, by extension, his marriage prospects, Dick’s remarks upon his romantic fate take on a decidedly evolutionary tone: “I shall have to make way for some one else, I suppose. That's the law of life” (*Sanctuary* 107). It is hard to see how Dick, clinging to Kate’s lap and proclaiming his own weakness, could rise up and become the “master of his own disposition” (Hume, “Delicacy” 10).

Making “the Dummy talk Dutch,” or a Coda Toward a Counterfeit Aesthetics

By recognizing disability as an aesthetic resource capable of transforming normative novelistic discourse, naturalist fiction takes an important yet tentative step toward a nascent literary disability aesthetics. If American Romanticists turn to the sublime and the grotesque as an epistemological departure from Neoclassical order and rationality, naturalist authors make a similar turn toward disability as both an epistemological and aesthetic challenge to realist conventions. Through the comingling of disability thematics and aesthetic polemics, naturalistic texts clear space for disability to appear as benign human variation. By countering the idealistic disability representations of realism and emphasizing the irrepressible forces of biology and nature on human kind, naturalist texts seemingly adopt a universalizing approach to disability

that disrupts the normative assumption that disability is an individual shortcoming situated within specific bodies. Figured in this way, disability no longer appears as an egalitarian type that is separate but somehow equal to normative subjects—as Howells would have it—but as the inevitable telos of species-being under the degenerative thumbs of feeble-mindedness and industrial capitalism. Although this movement from the individual to the collective signals an important shift toward understanding disability as a form of human variation instead of individual pathology, disability in naturalist fiction—from the “meek freaks” populating the dime museum in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie* (1893) to the howling lycanthropy in Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute*—always denotes the moral inferiority of the afflicted character and justifies social exclusion, unequal treatment, and even death. When disability does occur in the morally upright, like Norris’s Presley, from *The Octopus* (1901), or Dolliver Haight, it produces a cautionary tale about associating with the morally bankrupt. Presley finds himself embroiled in a violent conflict between the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad and San Joaquin Valley ranchers while he is convalescing from consumption at Magnus Derrick’s ranch, and Haight develops an opportunistic and debilitating sexually transmitted disease when he receives an unwanted kiss from a “fast girl” of Vandover’s acquaintance. Truly, this naturalistic reformulation of disability is a pyrrhic victory: despite a new catholicity of judgment that perceives latent disability in every body, its manifestation individuates the subject as morally and ethically bankrupt.

Drawn as they are from a biopolitical aesthetics of human disqualification, these stereotypical disability thematics often appear in texts that also foreground arguments that advocate embodied aesthetics. Norris’s *Vandover the Brute* focuses on a specific form of degeneracy that is signaled by his poor aesthetic discernment; an aspiring artist in the *trompe*

l'oeil style, Vandover possesses an insatiable desire for sensuous activity that causes him to lose what artistic skill he once had. Wharton's *Sanctuary* foregrounds Kate Orme's maternal responsibility under a biopolitical regime that blurs the distinction between positive and negative eugenics, yet the moral crisis that determines her effectiveness involves a design contest for a museum in New York City that her son, an architect trained at *Beaux-Arts*, knows he cannot win on his own merit. His development is hampered by a self-preserving inconstancy that compels him always toward paths of least resistance: as a child, he switches artistic media at the first sign of criticism, and as an architect he considers using a superior but fraudulent set of drawings as his own to compensate for the shortcomings of his vestigial aesthetic sense.

As these characters speed toward their descents, they encounter other conventionally disabled characters whose impairments and subjectivities inform our understanding of the texts' major characters as similarly disabled. In *Vandover and the Brute*, the Dummy, whom Vandover befriends only in the depths of his own dissipation, is unable to hear or speak and thus appears as an animalistic brute whose efforts to perform aspects of normative identity provide an inverse image to Vandover's own decline. When the Dummy becomes exceptionally drunk, he speaks, to the delight of Vandover and Ellis who encourage him to over consume. After trying an especially potent liquor in Vandover's room, Ellis amplifies the perceived absurdity of the Dummy's actions by stating, "I think a pint of this would make the Dummy talk Dutch" (Norris, "Vandover" 215). Further, the Dummy expresses what his friends see as a pathetic anger when he is rejected by Flossie for a college fullback who embodies hypermasculinity. If alcohol transforms Vandover into a dog that runs naked on all fours, it makes the Dummy act as if he were a qualified human. While both are disqualified, the crippled gesture of naturalism encourages us not to see them as equal—the novel suggests that Vandover's life might have been

otherwise except for “chance,” while the Dummy seems destined by his heredity to be an object of others’ humor, not a legitimate self-willed subject deserving of disqualification.

Similarly, *Sanctuary*’s Dick Peyton is framed by two deaths attributed to weak constitutions, those of his father and his best friend, that function both as object lessons for the audience and deforming external stimuli for Dick. Denis dies while Dick is young, leaving him to become the sole object of a mother whose “love for her boy had come to be merely a kind of extended egotism” (Wharton, *Sanctuary* 109). The novella suggests that while Kate manages Dick’s life in an effort to eradicate his inherent taint, she also disables him by depriving him of opportunities to test his own mettle and forge an individual character. Unlike the Old Gentleman who fears the effects of Paris and thus prevents Vandover from studying there, Kate moves with Dick to Paris and keeps house for him. The ambiguity of the novella’s final scene drives home the uncertain effects of Kate’s maternal biopolitics by presenting Dick as capable of ethical conduct with the appropriate support but perhaps unable to function solely under his own direction. Far from appearing as an argument on behalf of a logic of care and interdependence, the scene suggests that maternal influence has situated Dick outside society altogether. Paul Darrow’s death, however, establishes a counterpoint—without the stability of social influences, Darrow overworks himself in a gesture that evokes the Romantic genius: his aesthetic sense is so powerful and his artistic ability so great that they simply consume his weak body. Wharton leaves us with two unpalatable alternatives: subordinate yourself to habits and practices that nullify in-built flaws but introduce their own limitations or give free play to your inherent limitations and hope for the best while you expect the worst.

Disability appears as the perfect trope for naturalist fiction that attempts to offer mimetic representations of human kind through the lens of emergent naturalist philosophy without

capitulating to hereditary determinism. These conventions establish a representational durability that proceeds from the conjunction of the medical model of disability, which perceives disability as an embodied pathology inherent to individual bodies in need of cure, with a broad cultural anxiety about dependence, at once viewed as a subjective state antithetical to American individualism and as a social location produced by the rampant proletarianization of labor. In conversation with broad cultural anxieties related to Reconstruction and the spread of feeble-mindedness, the naturalist thematic uses disability thematically to elaborate the cultural effects of deterministic heredity and social Darwinism by foregrounding scenes of urban life and poverty and postulating the degrading nature of industrial capitalism (Campbell 499). In this way, naturalist fiction participates in the biopolitical aesthetics of human disqualification, a form of classification and social management that perpetually risks reifying disability as the telos of degeneracy and sentimentalizing disabled people. Although the use of disability by naturalist authors initiates a new conversation about the aesthetic value of disability in representational art, a conversation expounded upon under the aegis of Modernism, naturalism fails to deliver on its own promise by insistently pathologizing physical, neurological, and affective differences. We might call this counterfeit aesthetic position “disability kitsch.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Disability Kitsch, Literary Inclusionism, and the Crip Art of Aesthetic Failure

“All kitsch is academic, and
conversely, all that’s academic is
kitsch.”

Clement Greenberg,
“Avant-Garde and Kitsch”

Crippling the Kitsch Landscape

Despite the increased centrality of disabled characters in modernist and postmodern texts, representations of disability in 20th century American literary fiction typically manifest as kitsch. “Disability kitsch,” the subject of this chapter, refers to those literary appearances of disability meant to provide aesthetic experiences but instead rehearse normative tropes of disability as pathology or lack. Martin Călinescu describes kitsch as an “aesthetic form of lying” (229), and Monica Kjellman-Chapin locates this deception at “the level of the experiential,” meaning that “[kitsch] purports to provide its viewer with an aesthetic experience, but can only provide an approximation of it to varying degrees of nearness” (28). Aesthetic experience and kitsch are discursive constructs, of course, with the former certifying a given cultural production—be it a novel, painting, or other cultural artifact—as legitimate and conferring upon its appreciative

audience the cultural capital associated with high culture and refinement. The latter, kitsch, banishes its object to a realm of imitative irrelevance and marks its audience as an uneducated mass lacking the sensibility and refinement to exercise good taste. Disability kitsch de-couples the concept from lowbrow culture by referring to all disability representations that are seemingly deployed in the service of a progressive aesthetic but depend on uncritical, stereotypical assumptions to make meaning.

Published in *Partisan Review* in 1939, Clement Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" remains an important source for contemporary considerations of kitsch, including this one. Greenberg celebrates the capacity of avant-garde art to "keep the culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence" as he links kitsch to forms of cultural inertia (Greenberg 36). At its best, Greenberg argues, avant-garde art foregrounds "the medium of [the artist's] own craft" to create "something valid solely on its own terms," but at its worst, avant-garde art produces works of "art for art's sake" that can alienate all but the most rarified audiences through their self-referential insularity (36). The avant-garde's "rear-guard" antinomy, kitsch objects eagerly fill the vacuum left by the estranging effects of "ambitious art," Greenberg opines (38–9). As the avant-garde's malignant other, kitsch maintains stasis, buttresses ideological normativity, and deploys the artistic conventions of any given medium in banal, unambitious ways that anticipate mass appeal. For Greenberg, kitsch "makers"—as distinct from artists—simply systematize the "devices, tricks...[and] themes" of high art and commodify them as objects that provide "vicarious experience and faked sensations" in place of authentic aesthetic experiences (40). This strong definition of kitsch implies that the kitsch object provides a self-apparent sign of the *type* of aesthetic experience the subject wishes to have. Thus, an

encounter with kitsch gratifies the *desire* for aesthetic experience but does not participate in an actual aesthetic experience.

In this strong sense, kitsch is identified with cultural productions that appeal to lower class tastes, and use of the term often absolves high art of its own uncritical and stereotypical effects by designating low-brow forms of art as the cultural Others where reactionary ideology flourishes (Boylan 47). This denigrating usage has led many contemporary cultural theorists to abandon the term altogether and replace it with Herbert Gans's (1974) concept of "taste cultures," Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) sense of creative cultural consumption, or demographic-based lifestyle analysis. These moves away from a prescriptive to an increasingly descriptive sense of kitsch are meant to validate cultural productions across social classes and to acknowledge the idiosyncratic preferences of any given subject. However, the frenetic cross-pollination of tastes across social classes so often taken as illustrations of individual autonomy, or what Cotten Seiler calls "expressive individualism," may indicate a cultural subordination in ascendance, not decline, for one is hard pressed to express oneself creatively when there is "no outside to capitalist production" (Seiler 12; Mitchell and Snyder, "Multitude" 186).⁸⁸

The systems of power transmitted by kitschy representations of non-dominant identities ignore the arbitrary boundary between high and low culture, appearing as natural and self-evident to the hegemon while eventually seeming so to the marginalized themselves through interpellation. Alexis Boylan rightly argues that the use of kitsch perpetuates a false dichotomy between low and high aesthetic cultures by positing that one trades in "good" ideological

⁸⁸ The blurring of taste occurs alongside the blurring of the division of labor in a world increasingly administered by the logic of late capitalism that entangles all social, economic, and aesthetic aspects of lived experience in ways that valorize and naturalize capital's own prosthetic logic. The erasure of the formerly sharp strokes that socially delineated the laborer and the capitalist does not herald wage laborers' final emancipation but instead announces their further captivity as capitalist social bricolage has become "increasingly confused with the natural order of things" (Mitchell and Snyder, "Multitude" 186).

positions while the other trades in “bad” ones (42). This ideological distance marks “the boundary between the realm of objects that are given serious and sustained museum and gallery visibility and academic consideration and thus are defined as ‘art,’ and those objects that are relegated to the world of popular and disposable commodities” (Boylan 44). While Boylan focuses on representations of race in visual arts, his insight can illuminate the problem of disability representation in highbrow literary productions, such as David Foster Wallace’s many disabled characters whose largely tragi-comic representations are elevated by the patina of high postmodernism. While Boylan advocates the discontinuation of the concept, I argue that kitsch deserves to be retained as a term for two reasons: first, because the critical application of techniques most often associated with it—including imitation, repetition, and mass production—do produce aesthetic effects that establish kitsch as a legitimate form of art, and second, because uncritical kitsch representations can reveal subordinating mechanisms of aesthetic practice that freely traverse the imagined boundary between fine and popular arts.

From Willa Cather’s scarred expatriates to Jack Kerouac’s saintly “spastics” to David Foster Wallace’s homodontic auteurs, the nonnormative embodiments that manifest as disability kitsch often function as tokens of *aesthetic inclusionism*. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s define “inclusionism” as the “embrace of some forms of difference through making them unapparent” (*Biopolitics of Disability* 4). In inclusionism, easily assimilable types of disability, what Mitchell and Snyder call the “able-disabled,” are incorporated by normative institutions as evidence of their progressivism because they require no systemic reorganization of extant (and ableist) beliefs, practices, or spaces (*Biopolitics of Disability* 4, 12–3). Because it is an artistic convention, aesthetic inclusionism can mobilize *any disability modality*, not just the

able-disabled, to satisfy its demand for ordinary-extraordinary figures.⁸⁹ The spectacular banality of conventional disability representations frames disability as a legible difference from normative bodyminds while it paradoxically insists that this difference is no big deal. Disability kitsch in literature endeavors to evacuate the profound differences that make disability a source of knowledge production as it reaffirms the dominant conventions of normalcy behind a scrim of fraudulent progressivism, flattening human variation into a kind of normative crime scene outline or realistic type that always signifies the same socio-material lack. In short, somatic, cognitive, aesthetic, or affective differences appear in order to suggest aesthetic sophistication and to be erased.

As a mark of “*aesthetic inferiority*” (Călinescu 236, original emphasis), kitsch seems a fit partner for disability, given that “kitsch is quintessentially a physiological and psychological stratagem, an indispensable ... sociocultural modality that inheres at the center of modernity, and, as such, is used to produce and discipline bodies” (Amariglio 25). Matei Călinescu argues that “[aesthetic] inadequacy is often found in single objects whose formal qualities (material, shape, size, etc.) are inappropriate in relation to their cultural content or intention” (236). As a category of difference, disability similarly becomes legible through the relationship of nonnormative bodyminds to hypothetically average ones that are themselves determined by cultural contexts. Both the kitsch object and disability exhibit contradictory positions that move uneasily between independent and collective identities. The kitsch object announces its failed aesthetic state through its inability to produce the aura of an aesthetic object situated in an appropriate social context, thereby revealing itself as merely one iteration of a collection of identical mass produced objects. Disability is typically perceived as an individuating condition

⁸⁹ See Chapter 2, particularly the section “The Ordinary-Extraordinary.”

that is particular to a single subject, a condition favorable for the evocation of aura necessary for a work of fine art, yet that same subject also appears as an index of a broader marginalized group known for its general socio-political unfitness. If kitsch appears as the inevitable object of popular tastes expressed by a lower class whose aesthetic, moral, political, and embodied capacities are understood as inherently inferior to its higher class counterparts, then disability—understood as a manifestation of inbuilt inferiority—provides readymade content to be staged using repetitive, non-critical methods.

Despite the subjugating potential of stereotypical representation, disability kitsch can also refer to the unintended expressive potential of what I call the *crip art of failed aesthetics*, meaning disability's capacity to produce aesthetic experience that *exceeds* normative, ableist applications of it. Like any identity category, disability always surpasses the frames meant to contain it, and the inability of aesthetic inclusionism to divest disability of its antinormative potential affirms its potency as an alternative aesthetic, a political critique, and a “potential site for collective imagining” (Kafer 9). Just as Tobin Siebers's *Disability Theory* demonstrates the centrality of disability to concepts of the beautiful in modern visual art, I wish to argue that narrative art that *does not represent disability as beautiful* is often made beautiful by the presence of disability. By offering an alternative to aesthetic inclusionism, I hope to assert a more meaningful role for disability's thematic and formal presence in literary art. Instead of featuring disabled characters as static tropes meant to produce conventional affective responses or to propel normative characters and plot toward expected outcomes, literary art can turn to disability as an expressive resource by acknowledging disabled positionality. Michael Bérubé argues, for example, that the complexity of Part I of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

(1929)—or, I might say, its aesthetic beauty—originates in the narrator, Benjy Compson’s, atypical neurology (“Disability and Narrative” 575).

The political limits of thematic representation are revealed and the formal potential of disability aesthetics comes into view when the analytical framework of disability ecology is applied to the aesthetic conventions we associate with American literary modernism and the works that enact them. Willa Cather’s short story “The Profile” (1907) is a paradigmatic example of a Modernist text that uses disability as an object lesson in progressive aesthetics while it simultaneously disqualifies disability from the aesthetic consideration of beauty. By comingling descriptions of facial aesthetic disability with descriptions of real and imagined works of avant-garde art, particularly Édouard Manet’s *Olympia*, Cather’s story argues for an aesthetic position that exceeds the idealistic portrayal of normative bodies and welcomes the inclusion of corporeal difference as a gesture of authenticity. Cather’s treatment of disability, however, ultimately resonates as a form of aesthetic inclusionism given Virginia Dunlap’s sociopathic, malevolent acts at the story’s conclusion. Ernest Hemingway similarly uses disability as a token of the authentic in his novel *To Have and Have Not* (1937). In this novel, Harry Morgan undergoes a series of increasing disablements—a bite, an amputation, and finally death—that index his socio-economic victimization and subordination first by a wealthy but dishonest tourist, then by the economic policies that underwrote the Great Depression, and finally by the Communist revolutionaries who seek the overthrow of the Batista-backed government in Cuba. The novel pays particular attention to Harry Morgan’s negotiation of impairment and the impact of disability on his sense of self, while the form of the novel—written in three sections that incorporate at least four distinct points-of-view—makes a strong argument for the distributed, ecological nature of disability subjectivity. Perhaps most significantly, *To Have and Have Not*

largely avoids disability kitsch while offering an example of a disability aesthetics that depends on literary form, not representation. Taken together, these texts begin to sketch the limits of disability representations in Modernist fiction and reveal the aesthetic potential of crip form.

Modernist Disability and other “Matters of the Abattoir”

Originally published in *McClure’s Magazine*, Willa Cather’s short story “The Profile” (1907) begins with a framing narrative that establishes the story’s aesthetic and ethical stakes. This opening scene is set in the Impressionists’ Club in Paris where an unnamed painter, described as old and of the Second Empire, offers a disquisition on aesthetics. The assembled artists discuss *Circe’s Swine*, a (fictional) contemporary “picture” painted by a “young” German, who is also unnamed, that the Second Empire painter finds distasteful (Cather, “The Profile” 135).⁹⁰ The title of the painting, *Circe’s Swine*, alludes to a segment of Odysseus’s crew who are transformed into human-animal hybrids by Circe, the enchantress of Aea, most famously in Homer’s *Odyssey* (800 BCE) and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 CE). After a long period lost at sea, members of Odysseus’s crew enter Circe’s palace where, “in their heedlessness” (Homer 119) of custom and proper decorum, they satisfy their thirst with her enchanted brew (Ovid 14) and are thus transformed into a docile herd of swine.⁹¹

Circe myths forewarn against the suspension of rational judgment and the capitulation to bodily desire, turning to embodied metaphors of interspecies hybridity that suggest the monstrous inhumanity of those who lack reasoned self-direction. Cather’s fictional painting

⁹⁰ Polly Duryea speculates that Gustave Moreau’s *Circe* (Undated) may be the inspiration for *Circe’s Swine* (250), although the presence of Odysseus’s crew and the description that suggest their realism make this allusion seem unlikely.

⁹¹ Eurylochus, the leader of this group, provides an object lesson in practicality, caution, and restraint, for he remains “outside, foreboding mischief” (Homer 118) and, thus, escapes transformation. Poor Eurylochus, however, later provides another object lesson in the dangers of submitting to the appetites: on his urging, Odysseus’s crew steal Helios’s oxen, an act that summons the wrath of Zeus, who sends a storm that destroys Odysseus’s ship and kills the entire crew.

depicts these not-quite-human beings as “a herd of bestial things, variously diverging from the human type—furry-eared fauns, shaggy-hipped satyrs, apes with pink palms, snuffing jackals, and thick-jowled swine, all with more or less of agonized human intelligence protesting mutely from their hideous lineaments” (Cather, “The Profile” 135). For the Second Empire painter, such bodies as these—meaning ones that have been rendered inarticulate, made incapable of expressing or acting upon reason, and overly saturated with bodily desire—“have no proper place in art” (Cather, “The Profile” 135). That this criticism occurs in a social club named after a movement in art known for rejecting the principles of academic painting offers Cather’s readers an irony as sweet—and perhaps as enchanting—as Circe’s own honey- and wine-rich pottage.

Through the Second Empire painter’s critique, the opening passage articulates the major aesthetic themes that occupy the three subsequent sections of the story. Cather poses questions about what relationships exist between aesthetics and the material conditions of existence; what types of bodies are appropriate objects of representation; and what modes are adequate for representing them. Cather engages the first question, what are the relationships between aesthetics and the material conditions of experience, by contrasting the idealized Paris of Aaron Dunlap’s present with the hard scrabble Appalachia of the expatriate portraitist’s past. The aesthetic atmosphere of Paris is an effective analgesic capable of subduing those memories for a time, yet his painterly attempts to “arrest what was so fleeting [in his subjects] and to hold it back from the cruelty of the years” only temporarily delay his resigned acceptance that there is “no escaping from the cruelty of physical things” (Cather, “The Profile” 136, 138). Cather approaches the second question, what is a fit object for aesthetic representation, by triangulating the aesthetic practices that inform the fictional *Circe’s Swine*, Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), and Dunlap’s own portraiture. By placing these paintings in conversation, the story offers

Manet's *Olympia* as an analog for its own literary aesthetic practice: neither the Romanticism of *Circe's Swine* nor the idealism of Dunlap's portraits are forms of art in which technical innovation is a less significant vehicle of beauty. Through its allusion to *Olympia*, a painting that arrested viewers through its content and its material practice, "The Profile" argues that non-normative subjects are valid objects for aesthetic representation and denounces disembodied aesthetics. This argument sets the stage for examining the third question, what modes of representation are appropriate for non-normative subjects. Cather answers this question through her literary treatment of aesthetic disability, specifically Virginia's facial scar. While Cather writes the very corporeal difference that Dunlap finds unrepresentable, thus staking a claim for the aesthetic value of nonnormative embodiment, the story's fiendish conclusion rehearses long-standing assumptions about disabled people as both narcissistic and vindictive. Thus, the artistic potential of disability resolves to aesthetic inclusionism and, ultimately, disability kitsch.

A Return of Repressed Materiality

The literary history of "The Profile" speaks to the porous borders between the aesthetic and the material as well as the entangled relationships between literary ethics and disability. Cather originally intended to publish "The Profile" in her first collection of short stories, *The Troll Garden* (1905), a decision that resulted in her estrangement from her dear friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher for nearly fifteen years.⁹² Cather based the Virginia Gilbert, the aesthetically disabled character at the center of the drama, on Evelyn Osborne, Canfield's friend and fellow student in Paris. During Cather's first trip to Europe in 1902, she traveled with her friends Isabelle McClung and Fisher, who was then pursuing a PhD in French at the Sorbonne. While in

⁹² Information about the literary history of "The Profile" is drawn from Mark Madigan's "Willa Cather and Dorothy Canfield Fisher: Rift, Reconciliation, and One of Ours" (1990) and his paraphrases of Cather's then unpublished letters (Madigan, "Rift").

Paris, Cather met Osborne who, like Virginia Gilbert, enjoyed conspicuous dress and whose face featured a large scar (Madigan, “Torn”).

When Canfield learned in late 1904 that Cather planned to publish a story set in Paris featuring an American woman with a prominent facial scar, she wrote to Cather to express her concern over the fictional appropriation of Osborne. She requested a copy of the story before it was published so that she could determine how closely Virginia resembled Osborne. Two days after reading “The Profile,” Fisher wrote to Cather urging her not to publish the story because of the fidelity of Cather’s characterization, pleading “oh Willa don’t do this thing” (qtd. in Madigan, “Rift”). Yet Cather stated that “The Profile” would be included in the volume, indicating that its removal while already in page proofs would render the collection too small for publication. Isabelle McClure, with whom Cather was a housemate in Pittsburgh, separately argued for its inclusion to Canfield on the grounds that Cather’s aesthetic treatment of Osborne’s disability amounted to a transfer in ownership. “It is Willa’s scar now,” McClure wrote to Fisher, “not yours or mine or any ones [sic] but hers” (qtd. in Madigan, “Rift”). The story was dropped from the collection when Fisher brought this conflict to the direct attention of Cather’s publisher, S.S. McClure, and suggested that the representation might drive Osborne to suicide. Although the story would later appear in *McClure’s Magazine* in 1907 after Osborne’s death from appendicitis (Madigan, “Torn”), Cather changed the name of an artistic dilettante in another story in *The Troll Garden* to “Flavia,” the name of Fisher’s mother (Madigan, “Rift”).

Cather’s commitment to “The Profile” when confronted by its possible material effects supposes a worldview in which the “eternal material” (Cather, “Démouillé” 6) of art objects takes precedence over the material wellbeing of living subjects. The story stages a similar conflict by contrasting Aaron Dunlap’s idealistic perception of Paris as transcendent of all

material concerns with the material traumas of his childhood. Dunlap hails from a family and rural culture in which women are “hardly used”—his mother dies when she is forced back to work too soon after childbirth, and his grandmother endures the blistering leather strap of the savage grandfather to whom Dunlap is apprenticed as a cobbler. Instead of taking up the leather strap himself, Dunlap becomes “almost morbidly sensitive” (“The Profile” 136) to the ubiquitous (and presumptive) brutality of working class life as he experiences it—the struggle for subsistence, the inarticulate eruptions of anger and rage—so he takes ship to Paris to live a decorous life that the Second Empire painter would find fit for artistic representation.⁹³ For a time, Dunlap’s Paris marks a space where the aesthetic triumphs over the material: he escapes from slaving, impoverished Appalachian hollows that register as ugly, and finds relief in genteel *arrondissements* no less tender or welcoming for his meager purse. The newly emigrated Dunlap, the narrator tells us, dines on the sight of poplar leaves playing in the wind behind the Louvre, and he befriends the passing buses that shuttle Parisians across the Seine. Like a West Virginian Odysseus recreating on a Parisian Aeaëa, however, Dunlap’s luxurious decade of aesthetic beauty is so transcendent of material concerns that it necessarily “tempt[s] fate” (“The Profile” 136).

This delightful *entremets* abruptly ends when Dunlap confronts disability. He arrives at the Gilberts’ home to paint Virginia’s portrait, an encounter described as “one of the most excruciating experiences of his life” (“The Profile” 136). The daughter of a California wheat magnate, Virginia has a two-inch scar on her left cheek that Dunlap believes spoils her otherwise

⁹³ Cather offers another more charitable version of this dynamic in the short story “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” published in *The Troll Garden* (1905). In this story, Steavens—a “young stranger”—accompanies the body of his late sculptural master, Harvey Merrick, to his funeral in a small town in Kansas. Unlike “The Profile,” this story offers Merrick’s exodus as a viable solution to his problems. While most locals disparagingly recall Merrick, one sympathetic townsman wonders aloud to Steavens, “It’s not for me to say why, in the inscrutable wisdom of God, a genius should ever have been called from this place of hatred and bitter waters” (Cather, *Novels* 47).

exquisite beauty (“The Profile” 141). Repulsed and attracted to the scar, Dunlap perceives it as a disruption of the self-referential system of beauty that has sheltered him from the traumatic memories of his past. As he paints Virginia’s portrait in profile, “he was a prey to distressing memories” of “his mother and grandmother, of his little sister, who had died from the bite of a copperhead snake, as if they were creatures yet unreleased from suffering” (137). Believing that the scar embodies some existential truth about Virginia that she withholds from him, Dunlap bows to the obduracy of material life and admits there is “no escaping from the cruelty of physical things—no matter how high and bright the sunshine, how gray and poplar-clad the ways of one’s life” (138). For Dunlap—in fact, for every character in “The Profile” except for the painter of *Circe’s Swine*—the body is the ultimate repressed ever threatening a sublime return.

The Napoleonic Ideal Versus the “Grotesque Study”

In the Second Empire painter’s estimation, the artist who painted *Circe’s Swine* has denied the “decent and comely” forms of the body appropriate for artistic representation through his Romantic treatment of brutish human nature and monstrous embodiment (“The Profile” 135).⁹⁴ Such an affront implies that the German artist lacks aesthetic sense or, in other words, has bad taste. The Second Empire painter articulates the belief that only some objects are fit for aesthetic representation when he rejects the painting’s thematic content and not the technique of its rendering. Joyce Kessler describes this belief as the “rules of practice [that] make up the visual grammar” of mid-19th century French painting (Kessler). During the Second Empire in France, bodies in visual arts were expected to signify subjects exemplary of the “Napoleonic Ideal,” the ideological expression of authoritarian Bonapartism under Napoleon III, and to

⁹⁴ Paraphrasing T.J. Clark’s “Olympia’s Choice” (1984), Kessler states that “the art community of the Second Empire placed the ultimate value on the human form in its broader iconic value: any abridgment of this purpose by the disruption of its formal purity was considered a violation not only of the form but of all it represented” (Kessler).

encourage emulation of those desired qualities (Kessler).⁹⁵ In the liminal bodies represented in *Circe's Swine*, however, the Second Empire painter recognizes the challenge that disability poses to *de facto* criteria of human qualification. According to the ableist logic of the Second Empire painter's aesthetic theory, the body either signifies the ideal subject as a Napoleonic sublime or else appears as no more than a brutish object of human degeneracy fit only for the slaughterhouse, a "mere matter of the abattoir" ("The Profile" 135).

The Second Empire painter connects his aesthetic theory to human disqualification by offering a list of those who have "no proper place in art" that includes disabled people ("The Profile" 135). In his condemnation of *Circe's Swine*, the painter references three disabled characters from Victor Hugo's fiction, stating that corporeal "errors" such as "Triboulet, Quasimodo, [and] Gwynplaine," all figures infamous for their disabilities, are not fit subjects for aesthetic representation ("The Profile" 135).⁹⁶ By referencing Hugo's disabled characters, the Second Empire painter rejects Romantic aesthetic principles and at the same time establishes an aesthetic context against which Virginia Gilbert's facial scar is meant to resonate equally as a "grotesque." Although the narrator describes the painting as a "grotesque study," any sense of the Bahktinian in this usage must surely come from overreading, for the aesthetic program the Second Empire painter offers is totalizing, reactionary, and depressingly common. Viewing *Circe's Swine* and disabled bodies as failed aesthetic objects, the Second Empire painter articulates the tenets of the dominant nonmaterialist aesthetic tradition that denies the role of embodiment in representational art. It is in this spirit of affective erasure that the Second Empire

⁹⁵ Charles-Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, known as Napoleon III, was emperor of the Second French Empire from 1852 until 1870.

⁹⁶ Triboulet, a jester with microcephaly who served in the courts of Louis XII and Francis I of France, appears in Victor Hugo's play *The King Amuses Himself* (1832) as well as François Rabelais' *Le Tres Livre* (1856); Quasimodo is a disabled foundling in Hugo's *The Hunch-back of Notre Dame* (1831); and Gwynplaine is sold into slavery by the King and aesthetically disabled by his owners, the Comprachicos, so that he could beg for alms and perform in freak shows in Hugo's *The Man who Laughs* (1869).

painter offers the conditions by which a work can excite pity and fear, the twin pillars of aesthetics since Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Nonnormative bodyminds produce aesthetic failure, the Second Empire painter suggests, because they do not elicit the proper form of fear even if they succeed in evoking pity. Stating that the “only proper effects of horror within the province of the artist are psychological,” the Second Empire painter asserts that non-normative bodies provoke a horror made illicit by its dependence on gross materiality. His aesthetic sense reserves art for the representation of idealized, “decent” human bodies that signify natural purposes and functions; establishes the normative human body as the threshold of aesthetic fitness and the basis for justice, claiming that non-normative bodies are “wounded...beyond reparation”; and elevates these values in the name of civilization, rendering the only audience for such “freakish excesses” are “Huns and Iroquois, who could only be stirred by laceration and dismemberment” (Cather, “The Profile” 135).

Aesthetic Inclusionism and Disability Kitsch

Cather signals the disavowal of this philosophy of art by referencing Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) as an analogue of the aesthetic practice evident in “The Profile.” First exhibited in the 1865 Paris Salon, *Olympia* initially shocked audiences with its use of the conventions of classical arrangement typically reserved for goddesses, as in Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538), to depict a prostitute whose unabashed gaze at the viewer then challenged well established social hierarchies of gendered power. Cather references this aesthetic confusion by having Virginia's father, a California wheat magnate, experience “a state of abject bewilderment” when he views the painting at the Musée du Luxembourg from which Dunlap “rescue[s]” him not with an explanation of the painting but by leading him away from it (“The Profile” 136). Mr. Gilbert's

confusion and Dunlap's strategy of avoidance reference the dominant attitudes toward nonnormative embodiment that the story establishes.

Cather's choice to make a character with an aesthetic disability a central figure in her story mirrors Manet's inclusion of a disqualified subject in his provocative painting. Through this act of aesthetic inclusionism, Cather renders the facial scar as a trope seemingly capable of invigorating an American literary tradition cluttered with "over-furnished" realist novels and preoccupied with "mere verisimilitude" (Cather, "D meubl " 5–6). In her major theoretical treatment of the novel, "The Novel D meubl " (1922), Cather describes realist aesthetics as "an attitude of mind" that transforms the author into an object made to speak on behalf of the material environment, not its imaginative master ("D meubl " 6). She contrasts the dominant aesthetic world of profligate surfaces with a vision of literary art that "interpret[s] imaginatively the material and social investiture" of characters (Cather, "D meubl " 6). For Cather, the preferred mode of narration relies upon the "suggestion" raised by select details to conjure "the inexplicable presence of the thing not named," an affective experience "that gives high quality to the novel" and invokes the "eternal materials of art" ("D meubl " 6). While Manet and Cather seek to elevate their subjects through inclusion, Manet's non-academic technique—broad brushstrokes and harsh lighting to eliminate mid-tones (Harris and Zucker)—suggests a synergy between new subjects and new aesthetic practices while Cather continues to deploy typical conventions of disability representation.

Although Cather's aesthetic practice is most often discussed in relation to literary modernism, I want to focus briefly on a moment of generic discontinuity in "The Profile" that suggest indebtedness to literary naturalism, for it frames disability in its most marginalized (and

most representationally familiar) state.⁹⁷ Like Frank Norris, Cather grounds her anti-realist position in a return to Romanticism, citing Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) as a model for contemporary authors working in the wake of realism's ascendance. Because Hawthorne's readers confront a relative absence of vivid description of Puritan customs and furnishings, Cather "remember[s]"—perhaps incorrectly—that "one feels them, rather, in the dusk" ("Démeublé" 6).⁹⁸ Although Cather errs in her dismissal of the "importance of material objects" in realist fiction,⁹⁹ her criticism implies that details and objects in her fiction aspire to "exist, not so much in the author's mind, as in the emotional penumbra of the characters themselves" ("Démeublé" 6).¹⁰⁰

If Cather's use of detail in "The Profile" is penumbral, regarding disability it is ambiguously so, for Virginia Gilbert's facial scar is neither peripheral nor in shadow.¹⁰¹

Virginia's scar, the story's central image, is typically interpreted as an embodied symbol of the story's more significant thematic interests, such as the unequal distribution of power in

⁹⁷ Commenting on Manet's *Olympia*, Émile Zola states, "When our artists give us Venuses, they correct nature, they lie. Édouard Manet asked himself why lie, why not tell the truth; he introduced us to *Olympia*, this *filie* of our time, whom you meet on the sidewalks" (qtd. in Andersen 79).

⁹⁸ This opinion might warn us against making judgments based upon memory, for Hawthorne's three-page description of Governor Bellingham's mansion, not to mention the recurrent descriptions of Prynne's embroidered "A" and Chillingworth's disability, suggest memory's unfortunate imprecision.

⁹⁹ Cather advances an idealist aesthetic philosophy when she suggests that the description of material objects and environments is of lesser import simply because "the city [Balzac] built on paper is already crumbling" ("Démeublé" 6). In this regard, Cather assumes that the emotional freight of lived experience capable of producing great art is both commonly understood and transhistorical—it is "eternal material" apparently resistant to the inflections of situation or context.

¹⁰⁰ Cather's recuperation of romantic literary aesthetics suggests that one might consider her fiction in relation not just to literary modernism, as is typical, but also to literary naturalism, a form often perceived as derivative of realism yet consciously emulative of the romantic, according to its notable champion Frank Norris. See "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" in Frank Norris's *Novels and Essays* (Library of America, 1986).

¹⁰¹ It is worth noting, perhaps, that Hawthorne is similarly explicit in his descriptions of Roger Chillingworth, the vengeful and disabled husband of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. As Prynne stands upon the scaffold and surveys the crowd gathered for her public punishment, she recognizes Chillingworth, her just returned and disguised husband, because his left shoulder rises "a trifle higher" than the right (Hawthorne 55). The sight of his disability causes her to "[press] her infant to her bosom, with so convulsive a force that the poor babe uttered another cry of pain" (56). This disability is meant to function as the embodied symbol of his internal imbalance: Chillingworth values intellectual pursuits above his duties as a husband, an obsession that motivates Prynne's infidelity.

hierarchies of gender or the social differentiation between American and continental subjects.¹⁰² For example, Joyce Kessler interprets the scar as an index of the misogynistic violence done to women by regimes of feminine beauty and situates its function within her broader argument concerning Cather's "picture writing" (Kessler). Appropriating the phrase from Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918), Kessler describes picture writing as Cather's use of "the cultural narratives attached to well-known art images," such as situating Dunlap's accidental encounter with Virginia's father before *Olympia*.¹⁰³ Picture writing also encompasses Cather's more broad "understanding and use of visual semiosis—of the ways in which objects and materials, colors, marks, and forms are all used in the production of meaning," an understanding evident in the use of Virginia's scar as an index of her positionality as a gendered object (Kessler). Kessler argues that picture writing allows Cather to "[create] an additional—and sometimes oppositional—layer of meaning for her narratives," a multi-representational tactic that enables particular visual images to undermine the expressed logic of the narrative itself.¹⁰⁴

What Kessler identifies in "The Profile" as an example of picture writing, the predictable interpretation of the scar as a "tragic" sign of "morbidity effectively cancelling [Virginia's] young body's health" (Kessler), I read as aesthetic inclusionism that produces disability effects.¹⁰⁵ Picture writing may be a useful concept for investigating Cather's allusions to famous

¹⁰² Virginia and Dunlap, the principal American characters, both bears scars; their marriage produces a sickly child, Eleanor; and Miss Vane, Virginia's American cousin whom Dunlap comes to love for her affection toward Eleanor, is scarred by an improvised explosive that Virginia makes.

¹⁰³ Cather herself viewed Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), her favorite of his compositions, at the Luxembourg in 1902 (Duryea 221).

¹⁰⁴ Kessler's argument implicitly situates plot (whether Aristotelian or *fabula* or sequence of cardinal functions the argument never specifies) as the primary meaning maker in narrative art. Picture writing becomes a supplement or prosthetic, one component of the *sujeet*, that interacts with, reshapes, or inflects the logic of the plot.

¹⁰⁵ Picture writing, as Kessler defines and illustrates it, raises many questions. Regarding the first definition, one wonders what is particular about Cather's references to famous (or, as in "The Profile," infamous) works of visual art that cannot be described using the much simpler term "allusion." In this case, picture writing seems to suggest less an idiosyncratic method of signification within a particular text but more a systemic textual practice that Cather deploys more broadly in fiction writing. Regarding the second definition, one again wonders about the particularities of Cather's use of visual semiotics, for visual images have made meaning in narratives for millennia; it appears, for

works of visual art, and in this regard the pair of paintings that depict feminine power may be said to reframe Virginia's acts of violence into assertions of autonomy. Kessler's specific conflation of art objects and disabled bodies under the rubric of "visual semiotics," however, denies disabled characters their embodied subjectivity while, ironically, it polices strenuously a historically situated, aesthetic assault on feminine bodies. Like the disability effect,¹⁰⁶ picture writing requires readily available, uncritical interpretations of popular (even if rarified) objects to make meaning, the textualizations operating as plug-and-play devices that simply and predictably *mean* when deployed. Likewise, literary texts produce disability effects by including disabling details that evoke dominant, extratextual assumptions about particular disabilities, characteristics, or traits.¹⁰⁷ In the case of "The Profile," the scar is made mysterious and monstrous by its focalization through Dunlap's point of view, where it manifests as a contradiction to Virginia's otherwise beautiful visage that always renders her humanity illegible.

Virginia's scar *could* signify the general violence committed against women in a dominant patriarchy, but only if the scar were divested of its materiality, dislodged from the ecological network that structures her lived experience, and disembedded from its intratextual assemblage of disabling details. Virginia's scar is one node in a constellation of scars and acts of scarring, including scars on Dunlap's knuckles and the fresh facial scar on Eleanor Vane, Virginia's cousin and Dunlap's second wife, that mark characters as flawed aesthetic objects deserving of pity and that disqualify them from full socio-economic participation. These ancillary characteristics of embodiment signify social disqualification and, so doing, establish a

Kessler, that what distinguishes Cather's use of visual semiotics is the creation of supplementary or conflicting meanings that are absent from other aspects of the narrative (perhaps plot or cardinal functions?).

¹⁰⁶ See chapter 2, "The Spectacular Banality of Literary Disability."

¹⁰⁷ As I argue in chapter 2, disabling details typically occur in one of two forms. In the first case, disabling details are the words or phrases taken to signify particular physical or mental characteristics associated with disability, and in the second case, disabling details are produced by intratextual networks of signification, such as the bodily metaphors in William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* that encode Lindau's amputation with figural significance. For a more thorough explanation, see chapter 2.

context in which to interpret Virginia's own scar: Dunlap flees the cruel Appalachian culture of his youth with "hands that still bore the mark" of his apprenticeship to an abusive grandfather and expatriates himself in *Belle Époque* Paris where "little by little his stripes were healed," while Mademoiselle Vane suffers severe scarring in Virginia's act of retribution against Dunlap (Cather, "The Profile" 136, 140). Within this network of scar imagery, Virginia's aesthetic disability achieves its ambivalent meanings. That is to say, the scar never comes to rest as a detail of benign human variation or a penumbral inference but always thrums with the ugliness of violence and the logic of disqualification. Paradoxically, Virginia's identity as a disabled person is disappeared by the story's recurrent use of the scar as a parasitic supplement to her more commonly perceived identity categories of gender, race, class, and nationality. One might paraphrase this part of Kessler's argument by saying, perhaps with tongue tucked firmly in cheek, that Cather masterfully deploys a subjugating disability stereotype that assumes the stability of cultural meanings attached to physical difference in order to signify the contingency of lived experience for American women.

Despite its vital feminist politics, "The Profile" cannot be interpreted as an instance of disability aesthetics. Disability aesthetics intercepts the normative trajectory of artistic appreciation by attending to the historically contingent roles that disability has played in representational art.¹⁰⁸ For "The Profile" to further the project of disability aesthetics, the scar would have to signify, if only for a moment, either a transformation in the standards of feminine beauty or the emptiness of benign human variation, but even if we grant that Virginia appears as an object of disabling regimes of feminist beauty and that her acts of retributive violence obtain a patina of legitimacy due to her comprehensive victimization, as Kessler suggests, her scar *always*

¹⁰⁸ Unlike other forms of minority identity, disability does not suffer from a lack of inclusion in dominant Western artistic traditions but has long appeared in aesthetic representations without inciting commentary or critique beyond its classification as grotesquerie or the gothic.

signifies disqualification from social and political participation while the conclusion attempts to provide justification for such marginalization.¹⁰⁹

The strongest occurrence of disability kitsch is located in the story's conclusion that advances an essentialist understanding of disability. Until its conclusion, Cather's story implies that the attribution of meaning to benign aesthetic variation is folly, for Virginia seems to act with indifference to her aesthetic disability while Dunlap imbues the scar with pathos, believing that its appearance, the story of its provenance, and the disclosure of its debilitating effects must necessarily shape both Virginia's life and his own. While disability representations typically emphasize nonnormativity as an individuating pathology, "The Profile" initially suggests that it is Dunlap, not Virginia, who embodies pathology through his obsession with unmasking what he sees as her secret inner life; he assumes that "since he had married a woman outwardly different from others, he must have that within her which other women did not possess" ("The Profile" 137). Virginia does not fixate on her scar in the ways Dunlap expects, and her seeming ambivalence to it disrupts the narrative of marriage he has imagined for himself. This narrative rupture breaks down his self-perceived identity as a savior, and he becomes increasingly frustrated as his rolelessness deepens.

Despite Virginia's final acts of self-directed autonomy—she abandons Dunlap in Paris, seeks a divorce from California, and reestablishes herself in St. Petersburg, Russia—her aesthetic disability portends the inevitable expression of an inner monstrosity. Any promise of definitively reading the scar as a revolutionary mark that indexes patriarchal violence perpetrated against women is quite literally exploded when Virginia sabotages Miss Vane's lamp, turning it into an

¹⁰⁹ Kessler describes Virginia's maiming of Miss Vane as the act of a "painter" who performs "the only act that will allow her to signify the truth about the cruelty of the ideal of female beauty" (Kessler). If violence transforms Virginia into a painter, it also transforms Ms. Vane into a canvas; how this state of affairs provides an "oppositional layer of meaning" to "The Profile" remains unclear.

incendiary device that not only maims her cousin but also sets alight her own daughter, Eleanor (Cather, “The Profile” 140). By having Virginia treat Ms. Vane—whose only fault is her normatively maternal relationship with Eleanor—as an object of revenge, “The Profile” refuses a progressive feminist politics, while her use of facial disfigurement as a form of retributive punishment announces aesthetic disability as an undesirable state of abjection and disabled people as narcissistic, anti-social, and pathological. In this way, the thematic freight carried by the conclusion contradicts the story’s other instances that celebrate nonnormative embodiment as an aesthetic resource, such as in the interplay of Romantic and Impressionist paintings. Thus, the “picture written” anti-patriarchal politics that mark “The Profile” as a form of high art simply trade in “vicarious experience and faked sensations” (Greenberg 40) of kitsch when set against a background of disability stereotype.

Rehabilitating Aesthetic Inferiority

Such iterations of disability kitsch are not univocal, however, for the overdetermined nature of disability resists any totalizing circumscription. Marshaled onstage and given its delimiting script, disability always exceeds the narrow range of meanings afforded to it. Paradoxically, this same threatening excess is often the ground used to justify attempts at the biomedical, socio-economic, and aesthetic management of disabled people. For Rosemary Garland-Thomson, this contradiction is constitutive of egalitarian democracy itself. The figure of the liberal individual that underwrites American democracy, Garland Thomson claims, is always torn between a massifying “principle of equality [that] implies sameness of condition” and an individuating “promise of freedom [that] suggests the potential for uniqueness” (43). Disabled subjects foreground this incommensurability by appearing as bodies that resist biopolitical self-government and as iterations of “nonconformity incarnate” (44). We might borrow a phrase from

Jack Halberstam and say that what disabled people appear to lack “is what remains unattainable in all” citizens (Halberstam 100), but only in the crip do we notice its impossibility.¹¹⁰ The critique disability poses to liberal individualism and self-directed autonomy excites hegemony to defend their manufactured authority by silencing alternatives to it.

Proponents of kitsch find similar productive excess in discounted kitsch objects. In “Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy” (2000), Sam Binkley describes kitsch as an aesthetic prosthesis that makes modernity livable. In a society structured by “dis-embedding institutions”¹¹¹ that chronically unmoor subjects, kitsch earns its legitimacy when its affective capacities “shore up a sense of cosmic coherence in an unstable world of challenge, innovation and creativity” (135). The techniques associated with kitsch—“clichés, well rehearsed formulas, derivative content, and its use of obvious, easily triggered aesthetic responses, most typically sentimental feeling”—promise closure by establishing limits to the destabilizing plenitude of creative expression and consumer choice (139, 135).¹¹² Binkley’s recuperation of kitsch aligns with disability as I have been laboring to define it, meaning a mode of being that foregrounds the human interdependence obscured by the ideology of liberal individualism. He flatly rejects the notion of kitsch as parasitic or failed autonomy, a view that posits kitsch as the derivative of a false dialectic, in favor of recognizing it as “an achievement of dependence” (Binkley 141) that deconstructs the liberal subject, the autonomy of the artistic genius, and the divide between highbrow and lowbrow cultures. However, Binkley treats the quotidian as though it were itself *not* a form of appearance largely shaped by social class and

¹¹⁰ In his discussion of masculinities in the photography of Brassai, Halberstam argues that butch masculinities remind the audience that “ideal masculinity...is just out of reach” for all people regardless of sexual or gender identity (100).

¹¹¹ For his definition of contemporary societies, Binkley relies upon the work of Anthony Giddens, who originally claims that societies constituted by “dis-embedding institutions”— meaning beliefs, practices, and organizations that actively destabilize everyday life by offering a seemingly unlimited amount of lifestyle choices and attendant objects for consumption (Binkley 135)—that deprive subjects of “ontological security” (Giddens 18).

¹¹² Why this aesthetic practice among others should enjoy the privilege of fixing meaning Binkley does not say.

compulsory able-bodiedness.¹¹³ Thus, celebrating the quotidian as a means to re-embed the subject may quell existential anxiety for the normate, but it also promotes and reifies the hegemonic social system that structures human lives and qualifies some bodies while it disqualifies others. In this light, the mere presence of disability in a literary text registers as a form of critique regardless of the uses to which the representation is put.

Disability and aesthetics also share dominant perceptions of each as unproductive and useless. In “Bodies, Artworks, and Use Values” (2013), Terry Eagleton describes aestheticism as “a scandal to a society for which nothing is allowed to exist for its own sake, and as such can be a form of political radicalism” (Eagleton, “Bodies” 569). Perceived as a collection of “non-productive bodies” (Mitchell and Snyder, “Multitude” 184), disabled people represent a similar threat to capitalist logic through their inability to be assimilated by it. Their mere existence as living labor outside capitalism suggests alternative measures of value that contest the hegemony of competitive and expressive individualism. Eagleton argues that an aesthetic philosophy that prioritizes the inner logic of the art object—an argument for a correspondence between all of the components—merely inscribes the logic of utility into the work itself (Eagleton, “Bodies” 569). In a sense, the fetishization of an art object’s structure over its use operates as a sublimation of this logic, and this supposed act of resistance or retreat appears as a form of interpellation.

While post-structuralism and postmodern aesthetics provide vital aesthetic alternatives to closure and unity, coherence among parts has been constitutive of aesthetic appreciation since

¹¹³ Binkley’s sense that the “traditional model of cultural stratification is no longer adequate to the terms of contemporary cultural life” (150) certainly seemed plausible from an ableist U.S. perspective when he published this argument in 2000, with German reunification (1990), the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991), and the economic prosperity of the Clinton years and the dot-com bubble in the not-so-recent past. However, the Great Recession (2007-2009)—including the subprime mortgage crisis, the burst housing bubble and the resultant market correction (2007-2008), and the automotive industry crisis (2008-2010)—and the resulting Occupy movements suggest that we perhaps put the “traditional model of class stratification” to bed too soon. If traditional class stratification was outmoded in 2000, the effects of neoliberal capitalism seem to be bringing it back in vogue: in February 2014, a Forbes.com headline declared, “The U.S. Middle Class Is Turning Proletarian” (Kotkin).

Aristotle's *Poetics*. Martha Barry McKenna (2015) recently draws on the aesthetic philosophies of John Dewey and Maxine Greene to define aesthetic experience as necessarily beginning with the perception of an object's sensory elements and the cognitive ordering of them into a coherent form (89). Eagleton likens the relationship between the formal elements in a literary text, such as a poem's syntax and meter, with the non-causal, "intuitive" unity of bodies, and illustrates this relationship by claiming that, "I do not need a compass to know where my left foot is located" ("Bodies" 570). His assertion about proprioception may well be true for him (or have been true when he wrote the claim) but it certainly is not universally true, just as his decentering of the object's internal coherence does not necessarily entail a repudiation of coherence itself.¹¹⁴

If an appreciation of aesthetics is a rejection of the "tribunal of utility," as Eagleton suggests ("Bodies" 569), then disability aesthetics doubles down on the critical capacity of inutility. By accepting Eagleton's conceit that the relationship of textual *parts* to a literary *whole* is analogous to the relationship of organs to bodies while jettisoning his "intuitive logic" of coherence, we might begin to ask what kind of literary form corresponds, for example, to Oliver Sacks's "man who fell out of bed." In the eponymous essay by Sacks, a patient wakes one morning in the hospital and believes that his left leg has "disappeared" and been replaced by a cadaver's leg (57, 56). Unlike Eagleton, this man *is so unsure of where his left foot is located* that he attempts to throw the imposter leg out of bed only to find himself on the hospital floor (56). This man views his left leg as a strange prosthesis, an uncanny supplement outside his range of proprioceptive awareness, a "counterfeit" or "facsimile" that rests recalcitrantly among his network of organs and limbs. The transplanted leg's effect on locomotion is least

¹¹⁴ We witness the collapse of this supposition in a range of novels such as Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* (1973) when Lester Ballard wakes in the hospital after having his arm amputated and asks his nurse, "What'd they do with my arm?" (175), and Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999) when Professor McKean, another upper-extremity amputee, muses that his "arm is gone, but sometimes it's there" (102).

among the man's concerns. His anxieties, at least those that Sacks deems important enough to recount, acknowledge a crisis in the integrity of his sense of himself as a bounded, liberal subject. Sacks recalls him saying, "A man should know his own body, what's his and what's not—but this leg, this *thing*...doesn't feel right, doesn't feel real—and it doesn't *look* like part of me" (Sacks 57).

A literary form that corresponds to the self-awareness of "the man who fell out of bed" would demonstrate a *negative holistics* of embodiment that foregrounds constructedness and contingency, both conceptual and material, and that releases new expressive possibilities through antinormative aesthetic experience. The concept of negative holistics extends Tobin Siebers's claim that "all aesthetic objects...summon an imaginary engagement with the world wholly dependent on their form as the primary medium of representation" (*Aesthetics* 85) to argue for a *crip art of failed aesthetics*, an aesthetic experience in which disability invigorates narrative art and "poke[s] holes in the toxic positivity of everyday life" (Halberstam 3). This crip art contends that the *formal relationship* between disability and textual elements that foreground a given text's constructedness—such as the composite forms of Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909) and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), as well as the shifting points of view of Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937)—can be said to draw upon disability to offer the partial, fragmentary, and broken as instances of beauty. For example, Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* enacts a crip art of failed aesthetics thematically and formally. In the first case, Hemingway coordinates Harry Morgan's economic disenfranchisement with his incremental disablement, yet resists deploying amputation as a mere embodied metaphor of marginalization or lack. Instead, the representation of disability explores the socio-economic dynamics of an acquired impairment particularly in the contexts of self-directed autonomy and marriage. In the

second case, the narrative is divided into three unequal parts that are subdivided by multiple points-of-view. This technique—one that Hemingway first uses in *In Our Time* (1925)—evokes the distributed nature of disability ecology by tasking the interplay of asymmetrical parts and the narrative whole with the production of its strange beauty.

Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937) and the Crip Art of Aesthetic Failure

Ernest Hemingway's critically neglected *To Have and Have Not* demonstrates the crip art of failed aesthetics in two ways. First, it offers a more nuanced representation of the social effects of impairment on Harry Morgan's subjectivity, and second, it employs an asymmetrical narrative form that defies the logic of textual economy and encourages the reader to recognize antinormativity as a source of aesthetic pleasure. The only novel published in Hemingway's lifetime to be set on American soil, *To Have and Have Not* explores the downward mobility of Harry Morgan, a former police officer who lives in Key West but works seasonally as a fishing guide out of Havana. The novel is set against the backdrop of 1930s geopolitical precarity in Key West, where the Great Depression intersects with an already stagnant post-WWI production economy to force half of Key West residents on government assistance, and in Havana, where a violent transition from the dictatorship of President Gerardo Machado to the U.S.-backed Sergeant's Revolution of 1933 has brought Fulgencio Batista to power (Paul 134–5). In both locations, workers negotiate a turn away from manufacturing—the loss of cigar making and munitions production in Key West; the decline of sugar production in Cuba—to service economies in which the local “have nots” cater to tourists who “have.” During this time of shared economic hardship, the proximity of these regions—later made ominous by John F. Kennedy's Cold War warning that Key West is a mere “ninety miles from Cuba”—encouraged a robust shadow economy between the two poles centered on smuggling “stuff,” Harry Morgan's

generic term for a range of products and people that acknowledges the ultimate fungibility of bodies and objects that enables capitalist accumulation.

Despite being considered “not his best work” by many critics (Curnutt 16), *To Have and Have Not* uses disability aesthetics to register a powerful critique of self-directed autonomy and to promote interdependence as its conceptual and practical replacement. The novel marks Morgan’s increasing economic marginalization by recounting his transition from an independent contractor who provides chartered fishing trips to a smuggler of various types of contraband. Hemingway frames Morgan’s economic misfortunes as globally structured by a network of capitalist actors from banks to land developers to federal relief agencies, but locally triggered by individuals like Mr. Johnson, a tourist who charters Morgan’s boat for sixteen days, loses Morgan’s fishing tackle through negligence, and then flies back to Miami without paying. Morgan believes that dominant economic structures constrain his choices and deny him the “chance” to provide for his family, thus forcing him to participate in dishonest, black market economic activities that lead to the loss of his boat, his right arm, and ultimately his life. Although Morgan learns that one man cannot make it alone, the novel also critiques collectivism as an equally unviable system, depicting proletarian revolutionaries as kidnapers, bank robbers, and killers whose use of violent means to create an equitable economic base makes the promise of communism ring false. The novel offers no concrete middle path between unbridled self-interest and hypocritical collectivism, yet Hemingway’s critiques evoke a theme of interdependence by connecting self-determined economic activity with social responsibility, a mutual awareness reinforced by the narrative form itself.

Morgan’s amputation often functions as an embodied metaphor for this economic incapacity, yet Hemingway avoids disability kitsch by representing disability as a dynamic social

identity structured by a range of economic, aesthetic, and erotic actors. By offering disability as a site of creative interdependence, Hemingway unites the representation of Morgan's amputation with the novel's asymmetrical narrative form, or what Seokwoo Kwon calls the novel's "stylistic deformities" (Kwon 1042). Morgan's story is distributed over three sections, the first narrated from Morgan's point of view, the second from an omniscient third-person narrator's, and the third from a range of points-of-view that includes Morgan's, his friend Albert's, his wife Marie's, and an omniscient third-person narrator's. These thematic and formal features enact a crip art of failed aesthetics that emphasizes interdependence, the formal expressivity of disability, and the distributed nature of disability ecologies.

"One Man Alone Ain't got": The Ambivalence of Independence

Most critical debates concerning the novel focus on Morgan's dying words, "One man alone ain't got. No man alone now." Delirious from a fatal bullet wound and dehydration, Morgan speaks an unparseable sentence that has been variously interpreted as either an affirmation of collective action or a selfish lament for his own fate due to lack of one more gun-wielding shipmate (Kwon 1052). The former interpretation contradicts the depiction of communism in the novel as well as Hemingway's own tepid relationship with the radical Left, while the latter interpretation sees Morgan as a re-imagining of the "code hero" whose death indicts the practice of "taking it" with stoicism and grace. Kwon describes Morgan as an "aesthetic blunder" that materializes this ambiguity, but I suggest that Morgan embodies a contradiction at the heart of American citizenship—the twin gravitational pulls of conformity and uniqueness—that uses disability to transform his aesthetic disunity into productive failure. Like a typical code hero, Morgan initially displays "honor, courage, and endurance...[that] enable him to conduct himself well in the losing battle that is life" (Young 11), but the novel

argues that this ideology is futile. When Hemingway's code heroes face unyielding natural laws beyond human control, they are expected to "take it" with quiet fortitude. The novel rejects "taking it," however, and offers an illustration of human subjectivity beyond the Cartesian cogito when the critically injured Morgan "lay[s] there, trying hard in all of him not to die long after he could not think" in a testament to the body's fundamental drive to survive (Hemingway 181). Negotiating the call for collectivity and the trumpeting of autonomous individuality, the novel asserts an ideal subject position where individuals perceive themselves as embedded in reciprocal, interdependent networks with other actors and act toward one another with a measure of care.

The novel distills its critique of individual self-interest in an impressionistic scene at the conclusion. As rescuers tow a near-death Morgan and his borrowed boat into dock, the omniscient narrator tours a collection of nearby yachts, exposing the dubious economic activities that prop up this collection of "haves" among the "have nots." On one "barkentine rigged three-master" with a black hull evocative of other fictional pirate ships (Cordingly qtd. in Beegel 118), a "sixty-year-old grain broker" worries over the news that he is being investigated for financial improprieties (Hemingway 232-3). His concern rests on the length of his potential imprisonment, not on the many lives and families his illegal activities have led to ruin. After recounting multiple stories of suicide and the cascading traumas his illegal activity entails, the narrator explains that, "the men he broke made all these various exits but they never worried him. Somebody had to lose and only suckers worried" (238). By abdicating responsibility toward the network of relationships in which he is embedded, the broker demonstrates the dehumanizing effects of capitalist logic and exposes the autonomous liberal individual as a discursive construct divorced from material reality.

Hemingway's critique of self-interest in the absence of social responsibility finds its corollary in his depiction of the Cuban revolutionaries that Morgan pilots on his final crossing. Although the radical that Richard Gordon meets in the bar tells him that anyone with "brains" would be a "red," the novel meditates upon the damaging effects experienced by the individual actors whom the revolutionaries' attempts to "liberate" (Hemingway 204). The members of *Joven Cuba* on Morgan's boat justify their bank robbery on the grounds that they "do not do it for [them]selves. For a revolutionary organization" (Hemingway 157). Regarding the kidnapping, robbery, and murder that they undertake to finance their communist revolution, the leader Emilio says, "we have to use means that later we would never use. Also we have to employ people we would not employ later" (166). Emilio apologizes for the unmotivated murder of Morgan's mate and friend, Albert Tracey, by explaining that the shooter, Roberto, has become violent through their participation in revolutionary activities: "it's just what that phase of the revolution has done to him" (165). The expressed intentions of the revolutionaries—the dismissal of the army, the end of American imperialism in Cuba, the collective ownership of the large sugar estates—are to be built on a platform of violence that will transform the insurgents into the tyrants they oppose. Morgan articulates the paradox underwriting this revolutionary ideology when he laments Albert, thinking, "To help the working man [the communist] robs a bank and kills a fellow works with him and then kills that poor damn Albert that never did him any harm. That's a working man he kills. He never thinks of that. With a family" (Hemingway 168). As it appears to Morgan, the movement toward collectivism recasts its operatives as the paramilitary tyrants it is sworn to depose and cannibalizes the very constituency it claims to defend. In the trans-Caribbean world of the novel, neither isolated self-interest nor collective

revolution offers an ethical socio-economic model for individual working class citizens in the U.S. or Cuban.

“Put the Stump There”: Disability as Creative Interdependence

To Have and Have Not provides two models of interdependence that compensate for the losses that naked self-interest often generate. The operation of Morgan’s fishing boat provides a concrete space that functions optimally through the creative interdependence of crew members, while disability, both mental and physical, offers alternative ways of being that allow subjects to thrive within the limitations of a social milieu structured by the logic of capitalism. On his fishing boat, Morgan employs several crewmembers that seem unnecessary to Mr. Johnson, Morgan’s customer, who sees their labor only in terms of monetary expense. Morgan, however, sees how each person adds value and expertise, from a first mate to an expert baiter, to a fishing venture understood as a collective act. When Johnson interjects his sense of self-directed autonomy into the communal procedures, he not only fails to land a fish but also causes significant monetary loss. On a fishing charter “one out of fifty parties...know how to fish,” according to Morgan, so crew members typically cast multiple lines into the sea and pass the rods to customers once marlins have struck the bait (Hemingway 12). Chasing individual glory, Johnson “prefer[s] to have only one rod out” (12), but he becomes quickly tired and loses the rod, reel, and six-hundred yards of line overboard when he attempts to hold it steady with his body weight instead of with his hands. Disgusted as much by Johnson’s ineptitude as the material loss, Morgan criticizes his hubris and inflated self-opinion, saying “That’s what you wanted to fight by yourself” (21). Morgan’s message is clear: autonomous action in disadvantageous circumstances leads to loss, so one should have an honest appraisal of one’s own abilities and willingly rely on others to offset one’s own limitations.

Hemingway positions neurodiversity and nonnormative embodiment as social locations capable of resisting interpellation by the logics of liberal individualism and capitalism. When Richard Gordon, a popular novelist who has recently separated from his wife, meets a fan in a Key West bar, the fan tells him, “I’m crazy. . . . It’s just like being in love only it always comes out right” (Hemingway 197). The fan, Herbert Spellman, interprets his mental disability as a capacity to move beyond dominant forms of thought and experience love instead of anxiety. Mental disability, according to Spellman’s idyllic description, is “the only way to be happy in times like these” (197). Typical Americans in the midst of the Great Depression may be preoccupied by the fate of corporate forces, but Spellman is free from those concerns. “What do I care what Douglas Aircraft does,” he asks; “They can’t touch me” (197). Similarly, the veterans who work for the FERA project also recast illness and disability as a surprising augmentation, arguing that the euphoria produced by neurosyphilis amounts to a capacity, not a lack. When one unnamed vet in the bar asks, “What difference does the old rale [syphilis] make,” another answers, “None, the way we are now. . . . You’re just as happy with it” (Hemingway 215–6). By reframing syphilis as a capacity for increased happiness, not a pathological lack, the veterans offer a robust challenge to dominant assumptions about disability, public health, and sexual conduct. Hemingway’s instrumentalization of mental disability *does* misrepresent the lived experience of neuroatypicality as a univocal expression of *joie de vivre* capable of resisting the hegemonic rationality of market-driven social actors. Thus, the viability of mental disability as a form of critique is affirmed, yet neurodiverse people are subjugated by a representation that abdicates its responsibility to attend to the fullness of the lived experience of neurological difference.

Unlike representations of mental disability in the novel, Hemingway's treatment of nonnormative embodiment is not limited to one stereotypical meaning but acknowledges disability as a dynamic state that plays out in social interactions. Morgan's increasing physical disablement in each of the novel's three sections—a bite, an amputation, and finally death—*do* serve in part as an embodied metaphor for his increasing economic downward mobility but not exclusively so. Instead of relying on dominant assumptions about disability as static incapacity, *To Have and Have Not* offers representations of disability as a state of creative interdependence that plays out in a range of social milieus, most prominently work and sexuality. The injury to Morgan's arm occurs in the gap between Part One and Part Two, which opens in the aftermath of an alcohol smuggling run gone wrong. Morgan and Wesley, his mate, have been shot by a group of Cubans militants as they run their illicit cargo from Havana to Key West, and Morgan labors to complete the run as Wesley lies incapacitated in the hold although his injury is less serious than Morgan's. Immediately, the narrative begins to account for the practical and metaphysical effects of disability on Morgan, who is described as “spinning the wheel with one arm” (Hemingway 70). Morgan realizes that Wesley and he require immediate medical care, so he begins to hide their cargo in the shallow waters off Woman Key, telling Wesley that “he can put an anchor down...but [he] can't get no anchor up” and that “it was hard work one handed” (71, 72). Morgan acknowledges limitations and capacities, and his physical exertions seem reasonable given the situation, not the work of a “supercrip” who demonstrates hyperability nor one who displays nonproductive debility.

Hemingway further honors Morgan's specific capacities by using bodily metaphors as a way to critique dominant ableist culture, not Morgan or disability. When a chartered fishing boat carrying Frederick Harrison, a vacationing FERA bureaucrat and “one of the biggest men in the

administration,” approaches Morgan with the intent to stop his bootlegging operation, Harrison’s assistant remarks with approval, ““You’re really capturing him single-handed”” (82). In fact, the captain of the other boat contradicts Harrison’s order to return to Key West and takes the federal officials farther out to sea, giving Morgan time to finish hiding his cargo and establishing the limits of Harrison’s political authority. This empty celebration of bureaucratic prowess rings hollowly when contrasted with the difficult, albeit illicit, labor that Morgan performs literally with one hand. When the narrator later describes a prosthetic-wearing Morgan as working “handily” (Hemingway 115), the audience understands this as praise for his adaptability, not an ironic joke made at his expense.

The novel includes many passages that affirm Morgan’s adaptability and chronicle his developing disability subjectivity, including his response to the persistent questions posed by able-bodied normates. These passages typically narrate banal events that would otherwise pass unnoticed, such as lighting a cigarette or lifting a container, but occasionally run to the exotic, such as holding a man still before shooting him. Although the display of disabled people performing everyday tasks has a long, dehumanizing history in freak shows (Garland-Thomson 17), these quotidian moments speak to Morgan’s integration of nonnormative embodiment into his sense of self not a simple display of freakery or the spectacular. The description of lighting a cigarette reads like technical writing given its Taylorist precision—“He held the package under the flap of his arm and opened it at the corner, took a cigarette out and put it in his mouth, then dropped the package in his pocket and lit the cigarette” (123)—while a passing detail like “He patted [Marie] on the back with his arm stump” acknowledges nonnormative embodiment without striving to turn it into metaphor. Morgan also demonstrates a self-reflexive sense of humor when strangers question him about his disability. For example, when one of the Cuban

revolutionaries asks Morgan “How do you fish with one arm,” Morgan’s reply is a witty blend of Fordist efficiency and ironic mockery: “You just fish twice as fast” (Hemingway 103).

Likewise, when Bee-lips, an attorney who frequents Freddy’s bar, asks Morgan what caused the loss of his arm, Morgan replies, “I didn’t like the look of it so I cut it off” (92). Morgan’s response communicates the impropriety of the question by providing a clearly fictional answer, while the suggestion that he has voluntarily amputated his arm for aesthetic reasons speaks directly to the perceived incommensurability of productivity and aesthetics, a point to which we will soon return.

Hemingway also explores the impact of nonnormative embodiment on sexual activity, contrasting a scene between Morgan and Marie, his wife, in which his amputation cripples/queers sexual desire, with the treacherous relationships among the nondisabled tourists in Freddy’s bar. Morgan claims that his amputation has not affected his gender identity, stating that “A man’s still a man with one arm,” yet he expresses uncertainty about his desirability while in bed with Marie (91). As he asks, “do you mind the arm? Don’t it make you feel funny?” (Hemingway 113), the narrative acknowledges the social uncertainty disabled people often experience in mixed encounters even as it reveals the deep intimacy that Marie and he share. Marie’s response, “You’re silly. I like it. Any that’s you I like,” marks the arm as a characteristic to be *desired* instead of merely accepted. In the spirit of Hemingway’s “iceberg” theory of narration (and in accordance with then-contemporary obscenity standards), the level of detail in this sexual encounter is minimal; however, the details that Hemingway does provide indicate that Morgan’s amputation becomes an erotic object. As they make love, Marie tells Morgan, “Put it across there. Put it along there. Go on. I like it, true,” and her final exclamation, “Go ahead now. Put

the stump there. Hold it there. Hold it. Hold it now. Hold it” (113, 114), suggests that his amputated arm produces climactic sexual pleasure.

This positive description of cripple desire contrasts with the Machiavellian sexual practices of affluent tourists like the occupants of the yachts that populate the harbor, in general, and Richard Gordon, in specific. While the cast of minor characters who inhabit the yachts are disqualified because they enjoy a range of “special pleasures” in the bedroom or suffer from a failure to perform sexually by dint of being either a “Skull and Bones man” or an alcoholic, Gordon appears as a node where masculine privilege and bad aesthetics converge. A fiction writer, Gordon attempts an affair with Helène Bradley even though his wife, Helen, suspects him of it. When Gordon explains that Helène “interests [him] both as a woman and as a social phenomenon,” his wife wonders aloud if ““go[ing] to bed with a social phenomenon” is ““part of the homework of a writer”” (140). Richard justifies his future infidelity by explaining that ““a writer has to know everything”” and cannot ““restrict his experience to conform to bourgeois standards”” (140). Despite figuring himself as a bohemian, not just a simple libertine, he discovers that he cannot perform sexually while Helène’s husband watches them, an awareness that leads to *coitus interruptus*. Unsatisfied, Helène slaps him and impugns his bohemian identity, saying ““So that’s the kind of man you are.... I thought you were a man of the world”” (190).

Helène Bradley’s rejection calls Gordon’s double bluff: his self-proclaimed transcendence of normative codes of behavior is merely an excuse to indulge in the excesses of masculine privilege, and this conventional morality undermines his claims to an *avant-garde* aesthetic practice that Helen later reveals to be the opportunistic adoption of popular sentiment (190, 186). Helen would “stand for all the rest” of his infidelity, she claims, “if [he] were just a

good writer,” but his inauthentic prose bars her from forgiving him. She perceives aesthetic failure is his capacity for “changing [his] politics to suit the fashion” (186). Hemingway emphasizes Gordon’s inauthenticity by using the narrator to correct the false representations that Gordon writes. After passing an unknown Marie Morgan on the street, Richard thinks, “Look at that big ox.... What do you suppose a woman like that thinks about? What do you suppose she does in bed? How does her husband feel about her when she gets that size?” (176). He decides to “use the big woman” in the chapter he is writing, and he figures that her husband “hated her, hated the way she had coarsened and grown heavy, was repelled by her bleached hair” (177). To emphasize her repugnance, Gordon decides to “compare her to the young, firm-breasted, full-lipped little Jewess that had spoken at the meeting that evening” (177), a stock character associated with the genre of proletarian fiction. Although Gordon pronounces his daily output “terrific” and “true” (177), the reader immediately understands his misperception, for Morgan professes his love and appreciation to Marie throughout the novel, and Marie reminisces about how Morgan finds her bleach-blonde hair so appealing. Hemingway drives home the failure of Gordon’s art, and establishes his own claims to authenticity, by having the narrator explain that the anonymous woman is Marie Morgan on her way home from learning that Morgan has been critically shot. The narrator implies what the Red vet says aloud about Gordon’s novels: “‘I thought they were shit’” (186, 210).

The Disability Aesthetics of Asymmetrical Form

Richard Gordon’s thematic inauthenticity appears as the obverse to Hemingway’s crippled art of aesthetic failure. Since its publication, critics have similarly faulted the novel’s thematic ambiguities as well as “its shifting points of view, [and] its perceived lack of structure” (Knott 82). If Eagleton’s assertion that the reader intuitively perceives a correspondence between any

text's components is true, *To Have and Have Not* strains the limit of such perception if not exceeds it altogether. Hemingway divides the novel into three unequal sections, each with its own point of view and each separated by shifts in time and location. Part One, initially published as "One Trip Across" (1934) in *Cosmopolitan*, is told from the point-of-view of Morgan and set in Havana; Part Two, originally published as "The Tradesman Returns" (1936) in *Esquire*, is recounted by an omniscient third-person narrator and set in Key West; and Part Three distributes points-of-view according to chapters—the first and second belong to Albert Tracey and Morgan, respectively, while the other chapters are narrated by the omniscient third person. The chapters narrated in third person are often deeply immersed in free indirect discourse, a technique that allows the story to be filtered through additional points-of-view, including Gordon's and Marie's. Such formal disunity invited early critical dismissal of the novel during a period when literary self-containment marked a gold standard of aesthetics, and this criticism has largely been sustained.

The novel's resistance to self-containment, however, functions as a formal method of argument that demonstrates the productive capacity of the crip art of failed aesthetics. The fragmentation of the text as a material object, as well as the fragmentation of the narrative as a semiotic one, encourage the reader to witness the networks of disparate, heterogeneous parts that operate below what appears to be the seemingly bounded surface of books, stories, characters, and identities. This fragmentation extends to an unpublished fourth section, held in the Hemingway Collection in the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston. In "Tropical Iceberg: Cuban Turmoil in the 1930s and Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*," Steve Paul suggests that one must "know" this fragment and many other extratextual supplements to "fully understand [the novel's] content and context" (129). As readers contemplate the connections

between parts in *To Have and Have Not*, they also simultaneously encounter the dismemberment of Harry Morgan. Significantly, the narrator asserts that neither Morgan's amputation nor his incoherence immediately before death disqualify him as a subject. Morgan swears that "a man is still a man with one arm," and when the narrator explains that "*he* lay there, trying hard in all of him not to die long after he could not think," the narrative establishes a model of subjectivity that does not depend on normative embodiment or volitional, self-willed activity (97, 181). Such a dual awareness of the interactional fluidity of parts in the text, including the presence of an unpublished textual prosthetic, as well as the stability of identity despite the instability of human bodyminds brings with it the knowledge that each object, any object, is contingent and might always be otherwise. And the freedom to "live otherwise" (Kafer 7) is the essence of a crip futurity.

Disability Beyond Representation

Representations of nonnormative embodiment always risk invoking dominant stereotypes that subjugate and disenfranchise disabled people. Often, these representations appear as tokens of a progressive, egalitarian aesthetic, yet their reactionary material-semiotic effects suggest that any desired aesthetic experience have been substituted with prestructured, uncritical affective responses to difference already understood as pathological and debased. Disability kitsch signifies those artistic deployments of disability that promise new aesthetic experiences but that instead evoke assumptions about disability as an embodied pathology to generate conventional affective responses. This sense of disability kitsch extends a discursive formation inaugurated by Clement Greenberg in "*Avant-Garde and Kitsch*" (1939) but breaks from Greenberg's class-based premise to argue that disability kitsch—just like disability identity itself—manifests across

a range of aesthetic practices and interpretive communities. The object on the page and the subject on the street are both kitsch effects within an ableist gaze.

The literary analyses in the previous chapters have all tended toward this point. Disabling details in William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) and Charles Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) evoke formulaic stereotypes or clichés that create disability effects that, in turn, produce and sustain normative assumptions about disability as pathological; Frank Norris's *Vandover and the Brute* (1914) and Edith Wharton's *Sanctuary* (1903) appropriate disability as a trope that affirms a common humanity through the inevitability of disablement and as a means to register aesthetic critiques rooted in biopolitical disqualification. Like kitsch objects, these disability topoi rely on common forms of extratextual knowledge that deliver precisely what the audience has already anticipated about disability, and these figures simulate aesthetic experience by triggering prestructured, affective responses under the sign of aesthetic innovation. For this reason, kitsch remains a useful concept for exposing the historically situated techniques through which dominant culture has naturalized ableist ideology in works of high art.

Modernist fiction provides ample opportunities to explore the expressive possibilities of disability kitsch both thematically and formally. Willa Cather's short story "The Profile" demonstrates the technique of aesthetic inclusionism through its treatment of Virginia Dunlap's aesthetic disability. By aesthetic inclusionism, I refer to the insertion of disability into a text as a gesture of aesthetic innovation that ultimately fails to produce an aesthetic effect. Although Cather deploys Virginia's facial scar as an index of her social position outside the conventions of subordinated femininity, Virginia's final act of violent facial disfigurement against Ms. Vane rehearses typical negative assumptions about disabled people that frame them as universally

narcissistic, embittered, a resentful of the normatively embodied. The story's evocation of these assumptions forces a reconsider of Virginia's scar—no longer a simple figure that critiques patriarchal authority and regimes of feminine beauty, Virginia is a mere product of aesthetic inclusionism, a kitsch object that signifies what the audience already assumes it will signify.

The modernism of Willa Cather's "The Profile" trades in disability kitsch by annealing its argument for a return to embodied aesthetics to a set of representations of aesthetic disability that always signify as marks of disqualification. By foregrounding Virginia's aesthetic disqualification within a regime of feminine beauty, Cather reintroduces embodiment into dominant nonmaterialist aesthetics and reveals the permeable membrane between the supposed immateriality of theory and the ostensible obduracy of the material conditions of existence. In a similar manner, Dunlap's scarred knuckles, the "stripes" left by his grandfather's lash, embody the "agony of ignorance" that suffuses bare lives preoccupied by a struggle for existence that denies access to aesthetic experience. Yet the story reveals that his healed body does not correspond to a healed psyche, for the narrator describes Dunlap's decade in Paris spent living immersed in disembodied aesthetics—impossibly fed by the sight of poplars, imaginatively befriended by the spectacle of mass transportation—as a tangle of "sophistries" that unravel when he is forced to confront the practical necessities of marriage and fatherhood inflected by Virginia's disability and the sickly existence of Eleanor (Cather, "The Profile" 138).

Yet disability kitsch can exceed the limited, conventional meanings afford to it, a surfeit in evidence in "The Profile." The very existence of kitsch, as Theodor Adorno writes, "does in its way call attention, as few other art movements and manifestations have done, to the commodity and class status of art and artifacts" even if only through negation (22). The conflict between Dunlap and Virginia erupts from his repeated, failed attempts to match his lived

experience of marriage with the imagined narrative he has attached to Virginia's facial scar. From the outset, it is Dunlap who seems determined to understand Virginia's scar in conventional ways that the story initially denies. He perceives the scar as a semiotics of the body, a sign of a metaphysical difference that will enhance their intimacy once disclosed, and he marries Virginia in large part due to his non-critical yet authoritative reading of it. For example, what he interprets as "her courageous candor," meaning her lack of debilitating shame, "appealed to his chivalry, and he came to love her, not despite the scar, but, in a manner, for its very sake" (Cather, "The Profile" 137). Because Dunlap was raised in a family shaped by a rural culture in which women are "hardly used" ("The Profile" 136), meaning subjected to rigorous labor practices and sanctioned domestic abuse, he perceives Virginia as a victim whose aesthetic disability is an "injustice" (137) and his love, such as it is, as a means both to "heal her" and to provide reparations for the systemic and domestic violence his mother and grandmother have suffered ("The Profile" 136, 137). Given that neither Virginia nor Dunlap speak of the scar until a single evening many years into their marriage—an exasperated outburst by Dunlap, who cannot adjust to being a partner instead of a patriarch, that "whistle[s] drily in the air like his grandfather's thong" ("The Profile" 140)—one sees that Dunlap's entire life and Virginia's married life have been structured by his fictional narrative, while Virginia's self-perception, her interior life, has remained unmolested by it. Read this way, Dunlap appears just as pathological as Virginia, although her act of violence vindicates his misperception to a degree.

Ernest Hemingway's novel *To Have and Have Not* departs thematically and formally from the conventions of disability kitsch by representing nonnormative embodiment as a socio-material negotiation between actors and by using a narrative form that foregrounds the processes of assembly that allow heterogeneous networks of actors to appear as unified subjects or objects.

Although the novel does use the increasing disablement of Harry Morgan as an index of his diminishing economic opportunities, a strategy of embodied metaphor that typically tends toward disability kitsch, Hemingway includes many passages that explore the integration of impairment into Morgan's daily life. These scenes narrate public acts, such as captaining a boat and answering the inappropriate questions patrons ask at Freddy's bar, as well as private ones, like making love with his wife, in ways that frame disability as an alternate form of being, not a condition in need of cure or erasure. Disability materializes Morgan's belief in creative interdependence, a cooperative form of sociality that suggests a means to negotiate the collision of liberal individualism and revolutionary collectivism that dominates the novel. Furthermore, nonnormative embodiment makes available crip/queer forms of desire that appeal to Morgan and Marie, his nondisabled wife. She does not accommodate or "tolerate" his new impairment but welcomes it, loves it, and discovers its capacity for producing erotic pleasure.

Although Hemingway's representations of disability resist dominant stereotypes, the strongest argument for disability comes through the novel's form. The partitioning of the novel into three unequal parts and the random distribution of points-of-view across them, especially in Part Three, foregrounds the contingency of objects—and subjects, by implication—that appear to be whole and bounded. This *crip art of aesthetic failure* encourages the reader to accept disunity as an instance of beauty by foregrounding the productive interactions between textual parts that structure the narrative. In this way, the form of *To Have and Have Not* lays bare its own ecological system through which it signifies, and it provides a blueprint for thinking through the mutually constituting relationships between disparate actors that structure all objects and subjects.

Although literary instances of disability kitsch do not “make us better people or liberate us,” borrowing from Halberstam, they can “offer strange and anticapitalist logics of being and acting and knowing” (20–1). Whether that logic leads a woman to defy convention by divorcing her husband and reestablishing herself in St. Petersburg, as Virginia Dunlap does, or compels a fisherman to abandon normative ethics by engaging in illicit smuggling to support his family, disability exerts a productive pressure that allows these characters, and disabled people, to imagine a future in which they live by living otherwise.

CONCLUSION

Make Disability Great Again: Post-thematic Disability Aesthetics

On November 24, 2015, the then front-running Republican candidate for the U.S. presidency, Donald Trump, took to the podium in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and proceeded to imitate Serge Kovalski, a reporter for the *New York Times* who has arthrogyrosis, a congenital joint condition that is noticeable in his right arm and hand (DelReal). Kovalski had written an article on September 18, 2001, that states, “authorities detained and questioned a number of people who were allegedly seen celebrating the attacks [on the World Trade Center and Pentagon] and holding tailgate-style parties on rooftops while they watched the devastation on the other side of the river” (Kovalski). Although those claims were never corroborated, Trump had repeatedly cited this article in support of his false claim that he had personally seen “thousands of Muslims” in New Jersey celebrating the collapse of the World Trade Center towers. Prompted to comment by these new citations, Kovalski stated to CNN that “he did not recall ‘anyone saying there were thousands, or even hundreds, of people celebrating’” (DelReal). Trump’s response came in the form of a public shaming of Kovalski during a stump speech:

“Now, the poor guy—you’ve got to *see* this guy, ‘Ah, I don’t know what I said! I don’t remember!’” Trump said as he jerked his arms in front of his body. (DelReal, emphasis added).

Trump would later claim he was imitating a “groveling” reporter, but his prefatory comment marking Kovaleski as a spectacle—“you’ve got to see this guy”—as well as his familiarity with the reporter who had covered him for the *New York Daily News* between 1987 and 1993 suggest otherwise. Trump’s mocking produced a media firestorm as predictable for its vehemence as for its brevity and, sadly, its tenor. Kovaleski, according to colleagues who voiced their support on Twitter, is “one of the best reporters,” “a journalistic rock star,” and “the measure of men” (DelReal).

Kovaleski may be all of those things and more, but the corrections his supporters supply—he is productive, supremely capable, and an embodiment of masculinity itself—suggest the deficits still associated with disability in the 21st century, twenty-six years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). Trump’s mockery is unfounded, these responses imply in part, not because nonnormative is an illegitimate basis for mockery but because Kovaleski meets or exceeds normative criteria for productivity and gender performance. When a spokesperson for the *New York Times* rebuked Trump, stating, “We think it's outrageous that he would ridicule the appearance of one of our reporters” (DelReal), disability became an aesthetic difference, a simple matter of surface appearance that did not contaminate Kovaleski or the *Times* through association. It does disabled people no service to suggest that disability is only an aesthetic matter, although it is always partly so, and I do not raise these points to imply that his colleagues would have demurred in their defense if Kovaleski were a *mediocre reporter*, an *average dude*, or *disabled to the bone*.

Instead, I want to highlight the difficulty in legitimizing disability from its own overdetermined, material-semiotic social location or by using criteria that have not been derived from the hegemonic dominance of self-possessive neoliberal individualism. These continued

impasses have prompted the two questions that instigated this study. The first question was, where do material and social theories of disability intersect, and how could one theorize those points of contact? The second question was, how do we identify a literary character as disabled in the absence of a body, and what does that disability semiotics mean for people with nonnormative embodiments? Just as David Foster Wallace claims to have written *The Broom of the System* (1985) in part because he “got to wondering just what the difference was” between being a “character in a piece of fiction” and a “real person” (qtd. in Max), the ease with which readers and critics locate disability *in* fiction—a discursive space where the only body is the body of the text—has provoked me to wonder how much nonnormative bodies or neuroatypicality, what we might call the *material bodymind*, matters at all to the dominant understanding of disability.

I have attempted to answer these questions throughout these pages by looking at literary and historical texts from the turn of the twentieth century to the period between the World Wars. Spanning roughly five decades, this period saw the rise of social and political institutions, the production of new scientific knowledges, and the transformation of economic practices that continue to shape some of the most compelling questions of our day. Such questions ask what role should the government have, if any, in the biological certification of its citizens or those who immigrate? To what extent does biological heredity influence the quotidian experiences of individual subjects, and how does this influence affect claims for rights and citizenship? How do we define productivity at the level of the state, and should one’s health and wellbeing depend on productive capacity? If the presidential candidate for a major American party can openly mock disabled people and still receive a majority of his party’s support, finding answers to these

questions becomes perhaps even more pressing now than it seemed at the beginning of my research.

Despite the many inroads the preceding chapters have made into the questions that attend disability and its literary representation, and no matter how portable the concept of disability ecology is across genres and periods, these final pages are not a conclusion, but a provocation to think more closely about how these ideas—disability ecology, the disability effect, disability kitsch, and others—resonate with postwar and contemporary American fiction. I would like to offer three brief readings of novels from the latter half of the 20th century that demonstrate the persistence of many of the same uses of thematic disability that we have seen in novels by William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, and Ernest Hemingway, for example, but, more importantly, a re-imagining of disability that encompasses themes as well as forms. The first novel, Jack Kerouac's *The Town and the City* (1950), deploys disability as a mode of radical nonconformity that critiques the normative liberal subject. The second novel, Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989), recasts somatic disability as a sign of beauty and an object of crip/queer desire while it also reframes aesthetic surgery as a technology of productive disablement. Third, Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999) explores nonhuman agency and post-thematic disability aesthetics, meaning the formal instantiation of disability in the absence of disabled characters.

“Built for Suffering” in Jack Kerouac’s Two Americas

The Town and the City, like many of Kerouac's novels, foregrounds a “protagonist's attempt to forge a coherent, legible self from seemingly heterogeneous beliefs and practices

within a disaggregating society” (Kupetz 222).¹¹⁵ Kerouac views this quest as crucial to an ascendant postwar moment that had been fascinated by a “sinister new kind of efficiency” since “Western mankind...went on its ‘Civilization’ Rationale and developed relativity, jets and superbombs [and] had supercolossal, bureaucratic, totalitarian, benevolent, Big Brother structures” (*Blonde* 48, 49). Extant literary forms could not contain this emergent American subjectivity, the seamed offspring of “the V-for-Victory America” of Kerouac’s own postwar moment and the “essential and everlasting America” that he associates with the small town life he experienced during his interwar childhood (*Letters VI* 47). Thus, Kerouac believed that his fiction should “combine both Americas” (*Letters VI* 18).

In *The Town and The City*, Kerouac attempts the reconciliation of “two Americas” through the radical non-conformity of disability. He stages the contest between these two Americas as a competition between the ideologies of the city, figured as an inauthentic, superficial space subject to perpetual reconfiguration by its shifting heterogeneous political and economic influences, and the small town, figured as an authentic, stable place just beginning to feel the creep of late capitalist urbanization. Each ideology is contested by a disabled character’s nonnormative corporeality. The Midwestern scion transplanted to New York City, Waldo Meister, “a rare and curious person [because] he only has one arm,” embodies the atomizing effects of an anxious cosmopolitan proto-postmodernity, and Jimmy Bannon, a “spastic paralytic” from the fictional town of Galloway, disrupts nostalgic prewar liberal individualism rooted in authentic selfhood (*Town* 368, 39).

In a manner consistent with the realist aesthetic that he employs in this novel, Kerouac uses disability in *The Town and The City* as a kind of symbolic shorthand to impart meaning onto

¹¹⁵ For a fuller account of *The Town and the City* and a comparative reading with *On the Road* (1957), see Kupetz, Joshua. “‘Spastic Saints’: Jack Kerouac, Non-Conformity, and Disability Representation.” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 9.2 (2015): 135–152. CrossRef. Web.

his characters. In a letter to Neal Cassady, Kerouac writes that he deploys disability “on purpose for the plot ... in which Waldo, the queer, is pockmarked” (*Windblown* 305). By describing Waldo’s amputation as a pockmark, Kerouac evokes biblical conventions of representing disability as an outward sign of inner moral spoilage. An isolate only tangentially connected to social groups, Waldo represents the atomizing effects of the postwar culture under development, and his continental aesthetic tastes mark him for metaphorical disablement by dominant political and cultural forces. By linking continental influence with a postwar ideology situated in urban space—described as the “the turmoils of city-time and city-talk and city-life and city-sarcasm and city-weariness”—the novel argues that contemporary social practices actively deform otherwise authentic selves in two particular ways: first, by subsuming subjects into the system of early postmodern banality (a move that results in Waldo’s decadence and decay), and, second and conversely, by compelling the subject to inhabit a superficially oppositional position that elevates “perspective” (*Town* 492) above the material conditions of existence.

While Waldo’s main narrative function is to die a horrible death, a convenient disposal of his corporeal deviance that moves the plot forward, his suicide implicates the nondisabled characters for their causal actions. Leaving the morgue after confronting Waldo’s radically disarticulated body, Wood wonders, ““Did I do that to the guy?”” (*Town* 434). Peter’s answer is tellingly ambiguous: ““You didn’t do *that* to him, Ken”” (*Town* 435, original emphasis). Peter leaves unsaid that Kenny does bear some responsibility for creating disharmony in Waldo’s life but the ultimate cause of disability and death—the ultimate disability, perhaps—is the network of cultural forces brought to bear on a population of bodies, not just on individual subjects.

Jimmy Bannon, a “spastic paralytic” who lives in the small town of Galloway, appears as an equally complex representation of disability as Waldo, but with crucial differences that mark

him as a departure from conventional, subjugating disability representations. While Waldo's amputation and dismemberment demonstrate the deforming influence of an emergent postmodernity, Bannon's congenital impairment signifies a radical non-conformity premised on a set of criteria that diverges from those valued by late capitalist ideology. Bannon enjoys full employment due to Galloway's liminal position between modes of production despite the chronic under- or unemployment of disabled people under late capitalist production (Oliver and Barnes 55). The novel frames Galloway's economy as hesitantly capitalist—George Martin, who owns the print shop where Bannon works, believes in the primacy of interpersonal relationships over the impersonal profit of finance capital, yet his business is bought out from under him by men whom Martin had previously counted as friends. While Bannon's proficiency does affirm the normative values of productivity that undergird the neoliberal subject, his productivity is not the factor that makes him a co-equal in the social space of the shop. Bannon and the three non-disabled co-workers in the print shop, "four men at work," treat one another as equals because they "[share] an unnamable feeling of kinship" from communal effort spread over time (*Town* 39). The nondisabled men see Bannon's symptoms as performing a visible iteration of the suffering (he himself does not actually suffer) that each man shares simply by dint of being human. As the narrator reminds us, "men suffer because they are built for suffering" (*Town* 40).

By driving a car—a feat that perpetually astonishes the townspeople no matter how many times he demonstrates his proficiency—and by using the car horn "to greet some pretty girl on the sidewalk" (*Town* 39), Bannon performs a stereotypical gender role, one that depends on his self-willed activity and, unfortunately, his objectification of women. Although this detail invokes a central strategy of enfreakment, seeming more prodigious when he performs what to a normate is a commonplace task, it also figures Bannon as independent and possessing an agential

automobility, an idealized trait throughout Kerouac's *oeuvre*. Contrary to Meister, who Kerouac erases from the narrative, Bannon returns in the final pages as the last mourner to pay his respects at George Martin's viewing, establishing him as the prototype for alternate disability subjectivities to be deployed in subsequent novels. If Kerouac risks discursive subjugation by invoking a host of assumptions about disability, his representations' ability to call attention to their own artificiality allows them to operate symbolically. Instead of using disability to normalize his protagonists, Kerouac uses disability to reveal the artificial, alienating monstrosity of a government-led cultural war "whose front line was, ideally, not just here or there but everywhere and implicating everyone" (Harris 172).

“Better than Any Goddamned Mirror”: Neoliberal Subjectivities in Katherine Dunn’s

Geek Love

Katherine Dunn's novel *Geek Love* (1989), like Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1852), is an obligatory passage point in literary disability studies because it foregrounds so many critical issues in contemporary disability theory. The novel chronicles the rise and fall of The Binewski Fabulon, a traveling ten-in-one sideshow managed by Big Al and Crystal Lil Binewski and starring their children—Arturo, Electra, Iphigenia, Olympia, and Fortunato. This brief reading draws attention to two components of the novel that explore the intersection of biomedical interventions and the development of neoliberal subjects. First, I examine the Binewskis ethics of “somatic entrepreneurship,” my term for Al and Lil's use of back-alley biomedicine to produce nonnormatively embodied children suitable for exhibit in the Fabulon. Second, I examine the crisis of embodiment experienced by Miranda, Olympia's non-genetically modified daughter, who may elect to undergo an aesthetic surgery to achieve normative beauty, an act she perceives as self-impairment. The first instance deploys disability thematics to critique the neoliberal belief

that labor is the selling of an individual's embodied capacities, while the second inverts the aesthetic hierarchy of beauty by representing nonnormative embodiment as a crip/queer object of desire. Taken together, these movements demonstrate the viability of disability representation as a form of critique for normative neoliberal subjects and legitimize disability subjectivities according to their idiosyncratic logics.

The Binewski children appear as literal embodiments of the neoliberal subject. Neoliberalism is based on the belief that “the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions” thus its proponents attempt to “bring all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey 3). Neoliberal subjects, then, are those who cultivate their embodied capacities for exchange in the labor market. Al and Lil practice such a political economy when they subject their developing embryos to drugs and radiation to produce children who are “somatic entrepreneurs,” meaning those who can sell the spectacle of their nonnormative bodies as a form of embodied productivity. Given that the Binewskis abandon normatively embodied children, who they perceive as nonproductive bodies, their approach to reproduction radically re-contextualizes the concepts of biological fitness and economic productivity (to say nothing of parental responsibility); disability grants their children the “skills” to profit in a society driven to consume the spectacular. What to the reader appears as an arresting ideological position functions invisibly for the Binewski children: Arturo, whose limbs resemble flippers, continuously reinvents his stage persona to increase his value, initially performing as Aqua Boy and finally developing a cult following as an oracle; Electra and Iphigenia, who are conjoined twins, perform piano duets and sing; Olympia—whose dwarfism, albinism, and hunched back are judged as too pedestrian to make a profit—works as a barker; and Fortunato, who was almost abandoned because of his normative embodiment, uses

telekinesis to steal money from the marks who cruise the midway. Framing the self as a business enterprise, the novel presents Arturo and his siblings as embodiments of neoliberalism *par excellence*.

These representations are double-edged, of course, for they rely on dominant assumptions about disability to produce their defamiliarizing effects. The idealization of nonnormative embodiments only acts as a critique if those same embodiments are understood as undesirable. Yet the novel challenges these same assumptions in two ways. First, Arturo encourages disabled members of the public to display their somatic differences, not to hide them with prosthetics or clothing. Marking the novel's ambivalence toward disability, however, Arturo also takes financial advantage of those who buy into his performance as an oracle, organizing them into a cult that rewards its members with elective quadrilateral limb amputations. Second, the novel offers a meta-commentary on its own representational practice that encourages readers to perceive the symbolic use of disabled characters in multiple ways. Reading appears as an "openly interdependent" practice (Mitchell and Snyder, *Biopolitics of Disability* 3), for Arturo relies on Olympia to hold and turn the pages of the horror novels that he reads voraciously. Dunn emphasizes reading as an embodied practice through descriptions of Arturo's kinetic, affective responses to the horror novels he prefers: "Reading was never a quiet pastime for Arty. He rocked, grunted, muttered, and exclaimed" (Dunn 46). Given the monstrous content of horror writing, Olympia asks him if he is ever frightened by what he reads, and his response teaches Dunn's readers how to interpret the Binewski family: "These [books] are written by norms to scare norms. And do you know what the monsters and demons and rancid spirits are? Us, that's what. You and me. We are the things that come to the norms in nightmares" (46). As a disabled person, Arturo understands that literary tropes of physical difference share the cultural form of

alterity bestowed on nonliterary disability. These tropes arrive within a set of generic conventions, and Arturo's exegesis explains the explaining how both textualizations of disability and nonnormative embodiments are assigned meanings, with the former perceived as a conduit to truth about difference, the latter transformed into a living symbol or code, and both relevant for their impact on the lives of disabled people.

Miranda, Olympia and Arturo's daughter produced through a telekinetically-aided artificial insemination, appears as a figure who has not been fully interpellated into the Binewski's exemplary neoliberal ideology. While her aunts and uncles can trace their nonnormative bodies to Al and Crystal Lil's interventional tactics, Miranda demonstrates a corporeality generated by variation under nature: her human tail cannot be read conclusively as the genetic trace of her parents, whose bodily differences were superadded to them in utero but may not have effected their DNA, nor to her parent's manipulation *in utero*. Raised in an orphanage as a deviant among norms—she was abandoned for not being marketable enough—Miranda originally despises her tail, the mark of her exceptionality; however, when she performs as an exotic dance at The Glass House Club on a whim, she recognizes her nonnormative body as an instrument of power. The Glass House Club functions counter to the typical sideshow: in the essentializing context of the standard freak show, individuals with nonnormative bodies are clearly marginalized as other, subjects beyond-the-pale whose presumably-fragmented corporeality provides the mechanism by which the spectator can reconstitute him- or herself as whole. Performances at The Glass House Club reaffirm the audience members' differences instead of normalizing them, for the performers each display a “specialty”—knee-length pubic hair, a penis and scrotum “shriveled” by pre-operative hormone therapy, a human tail (Dunn

17)—that would mark them as deviant in the world outside the club but mark them as desirable in it.

Miranda must choose whether or not to accept the largesse of a benefactor, Miss Mary Lick, who offers to pay for the removal of Miranda’s tail and to provide monetary compensation while expecting nothing in return. The heir to a frozen food empire, Miss Lick sees sexual desirability as an impairment that disables women, so she pays normatively beautiful women to undergoing “disfiguring” elective surgeries in order to foreclose their objectification by the male gaze. Miss Lick catalogs a list of a success stories to Olympia, who befriends her, that suggest that her beneficiaries have achieved professional success and financial independence as a result of facial scarification, elective mastectomy, and other antiaesthetic procedures. Without the benefit of aesthetic disability, Miss Lick argues, these women would just “latch onto some man or die,” but Miss Lick’s “successes” flourish after they are seemingly deprived of sexual appeal (Dunn 334). Miranda presents Miss Lick with an epistemological problem, however, for she recognizes that Miranda’s somatic difference *is* a sexually desirable object after seeing her perform. In an interesting reversal, Miss Lick offers to pay Miranda to remove her tail, suggesting that *normalization* can function as a mode of disfigurement and desexualization. Unlike the other performers at the Glass House Club who hate their specialties, Miranda is ambivalent about hers. If she consents to the surgery, she tells Olympia, she will do so only for economic compensation, demonstrating an ambivalence toward her so-called natural body by instrumentalizing it for financial gain. Therefore, normalization becomes the conduit through which Miranda can be interpellated into the neoliberal ideology she has escaped so far, and the stigma typically attached to sex work gets attached instead to surgical techniques of normative beautification.

In addition to performing in the Glass House Club, Miranda studies to become a medical illustrator. When Olympia mistakenly refers to her as an artist, Miranda swiftly corrects her, saying, “No, no. A medical illustrator. For textbooks and manuals” (Dunn 30). By correcting Olympia and insisting that she practices illustration, explaining that ““photographs can be confusing. A drawing can be more specific and informative”” (Dunn 31), Miranda aligns illustration with a relationship to truth obscured by more conventionally *artistic* forms of representation. Miranda’s claim counters the supposed disinterested objectivity of a photograph, implying that only the embodied act of illustration can render the subject objectively, which is to say, in the closest approximation of truth. Olympia recognizes this fact through its effects in Miranda’s work: “loving portraits of callused arthritic hands and bunion-twisted feet, [and] a flayed jaw” bring Olympia near tears, and she refuses to look at Miranda’s complete images of her, acknowledging that she does not want to see herself without the filter of the Fabulon, a context that provides an alternative interpretive framework to the ideology of ability that structures life outside its encampment (Dunn 25, 341). Raised outside the Fabulon’s ideological reach, Miranda undermines Olympia’s assumptions about normativity under neoliberalism, collapsing the deconstruction of normative values that the world of the Fabulon seems to represent and insisting on her own efficacy as a source of knowledge production. As an instrument of objectivity, Miranda truly is “better than any goddamned mirror” (Dunn 341).

Colson Whitehead’s “Black Box Elevator”: Nonhuman Actors and Post-Representational Disability Aesthetics

Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999) is an exemplary text for thinking through disability ecology. The novel rightly earns praise as ““the freshest racial allegory since Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*”” (Kirn) for its nuanced depictions

of racism and sexism in the life of Lila Mae Watson. Lila Mae is a black female elevator inspector who lives and works in the spatially and temporally ambiguous “most famous city in the world” (Whitehead 12), a pre-Civil Rights era not-quite-New York in which elevator inspection is the highest esteemed civil service department. The novel develops a history of vertical transport, elevators, that parallels the racist history of horizontal transport, the U.S. railroad. Further, it codes Lila Mae’s inspection philosophy, known as Intuitionism, as exotic and presumptively feminine through its reliance on affective perception, not empirical measurement. Lila Mae serves as the embodiment of these subordinate identity categories as she searches first for the cause of a catastrophic crash in the empty Elevator Eleven of the Fanny Briggs Building, a new municipal building named after a famous ex-slave who had taught herself to read, and later for the lost plans to the “black box elevator.”

This brief reading will focus on the narrative strategy of deploying a nonhuman actor, the black box elevator, both as a point where all other actors intersect—from characters to themes to narrative forms—and as a structuring force capable of producing new buildings, cities, infrastructural networks, and subjects. In this way, the novel draws on disability as a structuring device in the near absence of disability representations. Both factions in the Elevator Inspectors Guild, the Empiricists and the Intuitionists, seek plans for the coveted black box elevator so that they might establish epistemological and professional dominance by wielding the black box’s power to initiate a “second elevation” (Whitehead 61). This theoretical elevator, once constructed, will inaugurate a period of creative destruction on the built environment and finally deliver a “shining city [that] will possess untold arms and a thousand eyes, mutability itself, constructed of yet-unconjured plastics. It will float, fly, fall, have no need of steel armature, have a liquid spine, no spine at all” (198). Because Lila Mae understands the current cityscape to be

structure by racist and classist logic, the black box elevator seems to portend a new era of civic equality through accessible design.

Whitehead amplifies this belief by rendering the plans for the black box as having an origin in a marginalized, minority social location. Developed by James Fulton, the founder of Intuitionism, the plans propose an elevator built according to a phenomenological perspective that promotes itself as a “postrational, innate,” and “Human” corrective to the positivist method of minute inspection and measurement common to Essentialism (Whitehead 27), Intuitionism is the scapegoated Other of the Empiricists who mark its practitioners with racial descriptors like “dark exotica, [and] the sinister foreign” and with nicknames such as “voodoo men, juju heads, [and] witch doctors” (57–8). By referring to Intuitionists as “freaks and misfits” (24), the narrative also links the practice to disability. In her search for the plans, Lila Mae learns that Fulton was a black man passing as white, new knowledge that causes her to reevaluate the relevance of Intuitionism and its racial implications.

The future world that the black box portends, one of creative interdependence rooted in nonnormativity, can only come into being through the interplay between materialism and idealism. Lila Mae perceives the materialist Empiricism as symptomatic of a racist culture easily distracted by surface characteristics, claiming that “White people’s reality is built on *what things appear to be*—that’s the business of Empiricism” (Whitehead 239, emphasis added). By implication, Intuitionism is the vehicle to apprehend *things as they really are*. Yet Lila Mae learns that Fulton intended Intuitionism as a joke, a satirical send up of the superficial ethos of Empiricism in *Volume 1*. When Intuitionism was taken seriously, Fulton wrote *Volume 2* in earnest, filling its pages with utopic design theory that he knew an enthralled market would attempt to fabricate for real world applications. Fulton’s lost notebooks, the preliminary drafts of

Volume 3 that contain plans for the black box, unite Essentialism's attention to material and engineering with Intuitionism's interest in affect and communication. When Lila Mae reviews Fulton's notebook pages, she realizes that their completion "*require[s] principles—a way of thinking—that [she] thought [she] had abandoned*" (206), meaning an Empiricist attention to matter. Her surprise registers as an indictment of the separation of materiality from social practice that animates both camps of inspectors.

The black box concentrates Whitehead's interest in probing the limits of identity by staging interactions between the animate materialities of human and nonhuman actors. In this way, it becomes a node in the novel's disability ecology that brings together the thematics of intersectional identity, capitalist logic, and nonnormative embodiment without directly representing a disabled person. This maneuver has caused some, including Michael Bérubé in an early analysis, to argue that the novel has little to say about disability. As evidence of disabled people being "notable in their almost complete absence from the text," Bérubé criticizes the research methods of Chuck Gould, Lila Mae's only friend in the department, who subspecializes in escalators. Gould is writing a monograph, "'Understanding Patterns of Escalator Use in Department Stores Simultaneously Equipped with Elevators,'" that is, according to Bérubé, "striking for its obliviousness to one aspect of the pattern" ("Race and Modernity" 175), namely the non-optional use of elevators by disabled people who wish to shop on other floors. Bérubé is right to note that Gould's non-acknowledgement of disability threatens the legitimacy of his research as it produces and affirms the continued subjugation of nonnormative embodiments by failing to account for their perspective. Gould does not indicate *any* specific demographic criteria in his research, however; instead he uses the first person plural "we" in phrases like "we choose the escalator, we choose the elevator, and these choices say much about who we are" (Whitehead

106). However, Chuck does not factor gender or race into his ethnographic analysis either, yet one would not cite this as evidence that the novel is disinterested in gender or race. A practicing Empiricist, Chuck's omissions are entirely consistent with an ideology in which the dominant subject position is white, male, hyper-rational, and non-disabled.

Read through the lens of disability ecology, *The Intuitionist*'s mix of formal interventions that establish the profundity of the black box —including passages from Fulton's notebooks, sections written from Elevator Eleven's point-of-view, and moments of free indirect discourse that reveal Lila Mae's perception of the black box—disclose its transformative power in terms of nonnormative embodiment. Even if we grant Bérubé's claim, which I am not sure we should, the black box embodies the concerns of critical disability studies in its new materialist approach to the black box and its meditations on the corresponsive relationships between elevators and their passengers. In the world of the novel, all elevators are agentic assemblages: the box is a separate yet interdependent technological artifact that relies on a passenger to hail it into being.

Whitehead discloses this in a flashback to Lila Mae's studies at the Institute of Vertical Transport. Professor McKean, who introduces her to Intuitionism and is an amputee, discusses the Dilemma of the Phantom Passenger: "The Dilemma of the Phantom Passenger asks what happens when the passenger who has engaged the call button departs.... It asks what happens to the elevator he summoned" (Whitehead 101). As the students debate the problem, most agree that elevators have will and that they pass through a spectrum of identities (called the "index of being") depending on who hails them. The range begins with the state of nonbeing experienced by an uncalled elevators, a state called "the eternal quiescence," includes an imperfect state of existence created when it is "summoned" by the "expectation of freight" created by a non-human witness such as a security camera, and ends in full immanence when hailed and used by a human

passenger (101). According to Lila Mae's reading of Fulton, "the elevator and the passenger need each other"; thus, they both exist intersubjectively as a mixture of individual wills and dynamic correspondence. Fulton himself establishes the elevator as an analog for the human being, stating that "the gloom of the shaft...does not merely echo the gloom inside every living creature, but duplicates it perfectly" (54).

"The Eternal Quiescence" or What Comes Next

Although these pages end, the discursive life of disability ecology has hopefully just begun. After the final terminal punctuation soon to come, disability ecology enters into its own "eternal quiescence" waiting for new uses in new futures, crip and otherwise. The readings of the three novels above suggest possible analytic futures for the intersection of disability ecology and literary disability studies, an intersection that—by now, one hopes—have obvious implications for thinking through the embodied experience of disability.

While literary criticism that identifies and excoriates subjugating representations of disability has been exercised to the point of near exhaustion, the particular techniques that specific texts deploy to create those representations require continued attention. Each new mode of representational subjugation, marginalization, or abjection reveals a social form that transcends the literary and speaks to a method—a law, a generic convention, a craven stump speech—by which disabled people are disqualified from full socio-economic participation. Likewise, those novels that escape from this representational cul de sac might offer useful instructions for considering an accessible political future for disabled people. Disability ecology provides a model and method for examining these new texts and the networks of semiotic, semantic, and syntactic actors that they deploy. Moreover, disability ecology reveals the sites where disability emerges as a technique of the self wholly separate from the normative subject of

liberal positivism, whether it appears as a mode of creative interdependence in a work of fiction or an object of crip/queer desire in the corner coffee shop.

As a technique of the self, disability is alive in the world and irrepressible in representation. It is always embodied, always aesthetic, always multiple, always contradictory, and always political. And so are you.

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