

*Fictions of Affliction*

## **Corporealities:** Discourses of Disability

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by Martha Stoddard Holmes

Fictions  
*of* Affliction

Physical Disability  
*in* Victorian Culture

*Martha Stoddard Holmes*

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This world's no blot for us,  
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good . . .  
—Robert Browning, “Fra Lippo Lippi”

In memory of  
*Mary Beatrice Dingle Stoddard,*  
1900–1983



## Preface

This book began with my own questions about bodies, emotions, and representation, and how we learn to feel about bodily variation in others and ourselves. What kind of bodies are represented as feeling bodies—stocked with pain, sympathy, disgust, desire, and laughter, not just blood, organs, tissues, nerves, and muscles? Why, and in what contexts, do we read our own or others' physical bodies as slates on which feelings are writ large, or as markers in an emotional landscape? What cultural texts inform those readings, what intelligence guides them, and what power do they wield (and for whom)? When we fume or cry over a story or film, what kinds of bodies raise our hackles or tears? What does it mean to evoke pity or fear, desire or disgust, through the look of our bodies and the cultural meanings other persons garner from them? Looking historically, what are the longer-term effects of the coding of all of our bodies—through the recurrent stories that shape our social relations—as bodies instructed to feel in limited ways? And finally, how have people scrambled these codes to feel or to mean otherwise?

I had no good answers to these questions. In my classes on cultural studies and the body, my students seemed to lack answers as well. While they were perfectly easy discussing “freaks,” when we read and talked about disability, they expressed discomfort: a mix of detachment, guilt,

irritation, and anxiety. The women, happy to discuss the cultural construction of women (while the men looked detached, guilty, irritated, and anxious), were uncomfortable talking about disability. The Latinos/as in the room, happy to engage the wild words of Gloria Anzaldúa (while the Anglos, especially the men, looked detached, guilty, irritated, and anxious), were perturbed as well; in fact, we were all troubled by talk about disability. “I never thought about disability and sexuality as having anything to do with each other before,” they wrote. “I would not want to date a disabled person. I’m not sure I can say why.” Yes, they were spirited and angry at overt messages devaluing disabled people, and ugly words like *retard* or *defective*. They loved joining in the heartwarming mood dictated by the road trip in the film *The Waterdance*, when four disabled men of different ethnicities steal the keys to the van and sneak out of rehab to a strip club (there was little support for the comment that these guys got their bonding on the backs, as it were, of women).

They were unsure, however, how to navigate a middle range of feelings, or how to take our discussions on the road. A student complained that after one class, she had seen a disabled person and, attending to our discussions of the stare that makes disabled people both ultravisible and invisible, had smiled and said hello, but had been rebuffed. Now she had no idea how to be and was much more uncomfortable than she had ever been about disability, thanks to this class. Palpable tension filled the room when we talked about education and inclusion; silliness dominated a role-play of receiving prenatal test results. These moments dropped us into issues about disability that neither goodwill nor righteous anger could address.

Trying to work out the relationships between disabled bodies and nondisabled ones made my students feel vulnerable because it was literally unimagined territory. They imagined they would date and marry a nondisabled person who would stay that way; they imagined they would always be nondisabled. The likelihood that any long marriage or partnership would end up with both people variously disabled was not in that world of imaginings. Even the people who shared the facts of their own disabling conditions seemed to need, in this social space of the classroom, to disavow full participation in the identity “disabled person.” Their valuable comments were couched in a variation of “I’m not a feminist, but . . .” They did not, in Simi Linton’s terms, “claim” disability. Coming to teach these classes straight from an NEH Summer Institute on disability studies, in which many people in our group had visible dis-

abilities and/or assistive devices, I was shocked at how suddenly difficult it was to talk about this central experience of being human.

I knew that all those uncomfortable spots in my classroom were just where we might begin the real work of understanding ability and disability; just when we were all hoping I would call for a break or return to the text, we were on the edge of something exciting and valuable. But how could we get there? Critical analyses never seemed to reach this place, much less tell us how to work through all the shades of feeling about disability without resorting to individual psychology or class discrimination. Fiction came much closer, but even with a wealth of new nuanced, situated, historicized scholarship that let us engage disability as we engaged gender, “race,” ethnicity, or class, we had the same conversations about compassion and inspiration, followed by defensiveness and boredom. If discomfort was the sign of real learning, or at least its potential, why could we not make more of our discomfort about disability?

The class’s failure of imagination with regard to disability was not simply a sign of lack of experience or of some essential immaturity. These were thoughtful, interesting, smart people, who responded earnestly to the series of difficult questions and troubling texts I gave them to wrestle with over the semester. Rather, I believe that our imaginative impasse was a product of those dominant cultural narratives—fictional and otherwise—that teach us what embodiment means, when it is desirable and when it is fearful. When these narratives speak at all about disability, they teach us that it is alien, terrifying, tragic; that it transforms your life in overwhelmingly negative ways; and that it is normal to feel horrified, relieved, and inspired, all from a safe distance, when we encounter disability: “I’m so glad I’m not disabled. I’m so impressed with the achievements of those who are.” My objection here is not with any of these feelings, *per se*, but with the fact that there are so few others suggested by the textual and visual narratives that train us how to picture, talk about, and enact the relationships to our own and others’ bodies shaped by the able-disabled binary.

This book offers part of the story of how we got here.

### *Affect in the Academy*

It is not always easy to study “feeling bodies” in the context of the academy, which doesn’t always know how to feel about bodies, or feelings, or

the scholars who study actual bodies rather than “the body” as an intellectualized, textualized entity. Disability by cultural definition makes visible that which will not be disappeared: the body and its sensations and needs, not all of which involve *jouissance*, at least not in the relatively limited terms imagined by nondisabled culture. Disability also makes visible that which must disappear, despite our best efforts: the body that is impermanent and will die. Disability reminds us of that which is most personal (and thus shameful) in the intellectual life, that which is not aesthetic or abstract. This same body is also what is least personal, most generically human—that which we in academia hope to surpass with distinctive and irreplaceable creations that usually celebrate our minds. This tension between the personal and the generic—the solid and the ephemeral—contributes to resistance to thinking of disability as a scholarly subject that requires or confers authority; because it is a basic human experience, we can speak about it without doing our homework (“We are all disabled”). Because it is a particular experience of individuals, what knowledgeable individuals say about it is often discounted as lacking scholarly authority (“That’s just her experience”). Even finding the words to engage the body, should we dare, is a problem. Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell point out that writing about the disabled body is not only difficult to do without producing a new frame of pathologization, voyeurism, leveling humanism, and so on, but more fundamentally challenging because there is no “sensual and sensory language to theorize the body itself.” Snyder and Mitchell turn to “body poetics” and the work of disabled writers and artists to show how culture can render the “elasticity” of the body; the challenge remains how to do this in academic writing (381–82).

Feelings are dangerous associations for scholars as well, to such an extent that

literary historians sometimes distance themselves from sentiment in the very act of talking about it. By studying the “ideological work” that sentiment is performing in [a] text or cultural milieu, the scholar allies himself or herself with ideology as the analytical term. (Ellison 6)

We often find ourselves using linguistic tongs to handle bodies and feelings, using phrases like “grammar of affect” or “economies of emotion,” to bring out some of my own. We are happier, perhaps, to anchor the

study of emotion to science, analyzing ever more complex and yet limited exteriorizations of affect such as images of “the palette of emotion” yielded by PET scans of the brain.<sup>1</sup> We need more situated, theoretically nuanced analyses of bodies and feelings that honor their social, intersubjective, and historical status and engage our actual lives in our feeling bodies.

My own situation is not necessarily clear from the pronoun *we* that peoples this preface. Throughout this book, I use *we* not only as a convenience, but also to indicate the fact that we are all affected by cultural representations of disability, even those rare few who do not become somehow disabled in the course of a lifetime. At the same time, I can’t offer the same “we” that a disabled scholar could bring to this book, or unpack disability representations from the perspective of anyone whose negotiations with those representations are habitual and mandatory. While the book’s early versions were written during a decade of invisible, context-specific bodily impairment, my particular experience is nowhere in the book, though it loomed large in the energy I brought to writing it and (even more) received from meeting the wonderful friends and scholars now central to my academic and social life. At this moment, I am more displaced from a disability experience than I was when the book began; in future moments, I can count on being closer to it again. From that shifting spot on the margins of disability, this book does its best to articulate a perspective of alliance and advocacy for those who identify or are identified as living at its heart.<sup>2</sup>

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An expanded, earlier version of parts of chapter 1 appeared as “Performing Affliction: Physical Disabilities in Victorian Melodrama,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 11 (2001): 5–24 (see Taylor and Francis journal Web site, <http://www.tandf.com>). An earlier version of parts of chapter

2 appeared as “The Twin Structure: Disabled Women in Victorian Courtship Plots,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, edited by Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda J. Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: MLA, 2002), 222–33; it is partially reprinted by permission of the Modern Language Association of America. A version of chapter 3 appeared as “‘Bolder with Her Lover in the Dark’: Wilkie Collins and Disabled Women’s Sexuality,” in *Reality’s Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins*, edited by Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003). Parts of chapter 5 appeared as “Working (with) the Rhetoric of Affliction: Autobiographical Narratives of Victorians with Physical Disabilities,” in *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*, edited by James Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 27–44 (© 2001 by the Board of Trustees, Southern Illinois University). I am grateful for permission to reprint these excerpts.

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Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has mentored, sustained, nurtured, and challenged me for the past ten years. Her own scholarship continues to “transfigure disability within the cultural imagination” and dazzle every venue in which she presents it (“the Beauty and the Freak” 181). To be in Rosemarie's company is to experience her energetic interest in stimulating others to do and present their own work, and her passion for connecting scholars who don't know each other, but should. Rosemarie originated many of the fora for our most crucial and exciting conversations about the body, some taking place even as you read these words. I can't thank her enough for these gifts, and for her kindness, wit, and friendship.

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