

Introduction
Disability Studies in Commotion
with Performance Studies

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Bodies in Commotion is the first collection to explore *disability as performance* across a wide range of meanings—disability as a performance of everyday life, as a metaphor in dramatic literature, and as the work of disabled performing artists. It is important to address these myriad meanings in tandem because the depictions of disability embedded in dramatic literature always frame the performance of everyday life, and because the sense that disability in daily life is already performance is reflected in the content and form of disabled artists' stage practices. Considering these meanings together raises questions that productively disturb conventional understandings of disability, traditional performance aesthetics, and performance studies and disability studies. How does a disability studies perspective shed new light on readings of disability in dramatic literature? How is disability performed and transformed using new media? How does the work of disabled performing artists transform the artistic genres in which they work? What new genres are they creating? How does this work confront medical, charity, and freak-show models of disability? How do performance events contribute to disability “cultures,” disability identities, and communication between disabled and nondisabled people? What do these perfor-

mances reveal about who is on the inside of disability culture and who is on the outside? What collaborative strategies have disabled and nondisabled artists used to bridge the gap between their experiences? Are these collaborations equal exchanges between mutually consenting partners, especially when the disabled artists include those with cognitive impairments or the institutionalized? How does the disabled body challenge theoretical notions of “performativity”?¹

Despite the fact that disability is a ubiquitous, even mundane, human experience, people with visible impairments almost always seem to “cause a commotion” in public spaces. An encounter with disability elicits surprise, attracting the attention of curious passersby.² The curious fight the urge to stare, to gather visual information that will help make sense of such startling physical difference.³ Disability is considered out of the ordinary, separate from the everyday, a cause for pause and consideration. Disability theorists David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder explain that in Western literary, rhetorical, and visual traditions disability “inaugurates the act of interpretation” by functioning as a signifying difference—something out of place, in need of correction.⁴ As in traditional representation, disability inaugurates the act of interpretation in representation in daily life. In daily life, disabled people can be considered performers, and passersby, the audience. Without the distancing effects of a proscenium frame and the actor’s distinctness from his or her character, disability becomes one of the most radical forms of performance art, “invisible theater” at its extremes.

The notion that disability is a kind of performance is to people with disabilities not a theoretical abstraction, but lived experience. The dramaturgical metaphor of identity construction, first described by sociologist Erving Goffman as the “performance of everyday life” and more recently by philosopher Judith Butler as “performativity,” is familiar to postmodern and poststructuralist scholars, but the notion that disability, too, is performed (like gender, sex, sexuality, race, and ethnicity) and not a static “fact” of the body is not widely acknowledged or theorized.⁵ While scholars such as Butler argue that identity is performed unconsciously, disabled people talk about performing their identities in explicitly self-conscious and theatrical terms, as does playwright and wheelchair user John Belluso:

Any time I get on a public bus, I feel like it’s a moment of theater. I’m lifted, the stage is moving up and I enter, and people are along the lines, and they’re turning and looking, and I make my entrance. It’s theater, and I have to perform. And I feel like we as disabled people are constantly onstage, and we’re constantly performing. We have to make the choice either to perform or not to perform. . . . There are times when it’s fantastic to perform your disability, it’s joyful, and it’s powerful. Like when I enter on the bus, I love it. I really feel like it’s an entrance, like, “I’m ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille.”⁶

Belluso echoes the experience of many visibly disabled people who become adept at turning disability stereotypes and narratives to their own ends. He transforms a potentially stigmatizing experience into an act of empowerment. When Belluso remarks that some disabled people may choose “not to perform,” he is alluding to another tactic: the attempt to “pass” as able-bodied. Yet one could consider these efforts to deflect attention from impairment as another kind of performance, a performance of able-bodiedness, one rehearsed every day in rehabilitation hospitals, prosthetic and orthodic labs, speech therapy clinics, and surgery rooms.

The goal of both the self-conscious performer and the “passer” is to become an active maker of meaning, rather than a passive specimen on display. The late Ed Roberts (a founder of the independent living movement and a man with quadriplegia) told journalist Joseph Shapiro that making the choice to perform his disability was the starting point of his life as an activist. After years of bed rest and home schooling, Roberts fought hard to return to public high school.

[Roberts’s] first day back at school . . . had been a revelation. As he was lifted from the car, he had felt the staring eyes of his schoolmates. Staring was what he had most feared. But the stares that day were not looks of disgust. Those who were discomfited had averted their eyes. Instead, these were stares of fascination and excitement, as if Elvis Presley had suddenly descended upon the school. “It was like being a star,” recalls Roberts. “So I decided to be a star, not a helpless cripple.”⁷

Roberts marshaled a kind of charismatic celebrity status throughout his life to fight for disability civil rights.

Manipulating and transforming stereotypes are important tactics, since the available “scripts” of disability—both in daily life and in representation—are frustratingly limited and deeply entrenched in the cultural imagination. Mitchell and Snyder argue that physical or cognitive impairment serves narrative as “material metaphor,” lending “a ‘tangible’ body to textual abstractions.” Individual characters become metaphors that signify “social and individual collapse.” Typical disabled characters are a familiar cast: the “obsessive avenger,” who seeks revenge against those he considers responsible for his disablement; the “sweet innocent” (otherwise known as the “Tiny Tim”), who acts as a moral barometer of the nondisabled; the “comic misadventurer,” whose impairments initiate physical comedy or whose body becomes the target for comic violence; the “inspirational overcomer,” the extraordinary individual who excels despite her impairments; the “charity case,” who elicits pity and allows others to mark themselves as nondisabled by bestowing goodwill; the “freak,” the ultimate outsider; and the “monster,” whose disfigurements arouse fear and horror.⁸ The fates of

such characters often include cure, death, or revaluation in the social order, a metaphorical quelling of the commotion that disability stirs up in narrative.⁹

Recently, disabled performers and theater artists have rejected these scripts and created work based on their own experiences, challenging both tired narrative conventions and aesthetic practices. Disability performance scholar and artist Petra Kupperts points out that the “physically impaired performer has . . . to negotiate two areas of cultural meaning: invisibility as an active member in the public sphere, and hypervisibility and instant categorisation.” Kupperts goes on to explain that cultural narratives of disability preempt anything else the artist might be trying to communicate; in other words, audiences assume that the “disabled body is *naturally* about disability.”¹⁰ Scholar and performer Catherine Cole discovered this phenomenon for herself when she recently became disabled. In the artist’s statement describing her dance-theater piece *Five Foot Feat*, she explains:

I became disabled over two years ago when I lost my entire left leg to cancer. As I adjusted to my new body circumstances, I became interested in the public spectacle of disability. Going about on crutches with one leg, I became a walking performance art piece, with people stopping to stare or avoiding eye contact all together. But whether people looked or didn’t look, I was a performer, a performer in a script I didn’t write. So in creating *Five Foot Feat*, I was interested in working *with* that spectacle, the energy of people’s visual interest in my body. I felt that by giving people permission to look, and to look on my terms, we could move beyond awkwardness to something more interesting. That’s why I begin *Five Foot Feat* by taking off my prosthetic leg. The opening moment of the show is a way of saying, “Here’s what my body looks like. Feel however you feel about that, and now let’s move on!”¹¹

Cole and other disabled artists confront cultural scripts and instant categories of disability before moving on to whatever else they want to communicate with audiences. In any performance medium, when disabled artists create work beyond the traditional roles provided for them, they necessarily challenge rigid aesthetic conventions. A dancer with one leg, for instance, upsets expectations that a dancer’s body will be symmetrical and able to execute standardized choreographic movements.

Disciplines in Commotion

The essays in this collection conceive of the performing disabled body as a one that dances across artistic boundaries, questions the foundations of cul-

tural theories, and agitates the divisions between academic disciplines. This presumes that a disability perspective is generative, challenging deeply held beliefs as well as newly emerging ones. In these essays, performance disrupts norms. Performance is a renegade term that describes bodies in a variety of contexts, from the overtly theatrical to the everyday.

Bodies in Commotion provides a platform for interdisciplinary conversations about disability and performance, conversations that have only recently begun to take place at academic conferences such as the Society for Disability Studies, the National Communication Association, the Modern Language Association, the Association for Theatre and Higher Education, and Performance Studies International. In the 1990s interdisciplinary essays began to surface in collections and journals devoted to disability art, literature, and culture. Important essays have appeared in anthologies in the series *Corporealities: Discourses of Disability* (of which our collection is a part): David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000); Susan Crutchfield and Marcy Epstein's *Points of Contact: Disability, Art, and Culture* (1999); and Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum's "*Defects*": *Engendering the Modern Body* (1999). Each of these collections includes essays devoted to disability in dance, theater, performance art, or dramatic literature. Other books, too, have explored disability performances. Kenny Fries' *Staring Back: The Experience of Disability from the Inside Out* (Plume, 1997) includes a section on theater. The journal *Contemporary Theatre Review* published a special issue entitled "Disability and Performance" (2001) edited by Petra Kuppens. And Thomas Fahy and Kimball King's *Peering Behind the Curtain: Disability, Illness, and the Extraordinary Body in Contemporary Theatre* (Routledge, 2002) combines dramatic criticism with interviews with artists and includes a full-length play by James MacDonald.¹²

It's not surprising that essays on disability and performance should appear in these collections, given the theatricality of disability and the centrality of performance to the formation of disability cultures and identities. Additionally, disability studies and performance studies share many qualities: academic-activist roots, interdisciplinarity, the body as primary object of study, an international scope, and an interest in the politics and dynamics of representation. Now a growing body of work by disabled performers and playwrights, especially those who make issues of disability central to their work, is bringing these two fields together. New interdisciplinary tools are needed to analyze the performances of artists such as Terry Galloway, Ron Athey, Angela Elsworth, Greg Walloch, the late Mike Lamitola, Cheryl Marie Wade, Mary Duffy, and the late Bob Flanagan; disability dance companies such as the Bay Area's Axis, London's CandoCo, and Seattle's Light Motion; theater companies such as Joan Lipkin's DisAbility Project, the

National Theatre of the Deaf, the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped, and Joseph Chaikin's Disability Project; and disabled playwrights such as John Belluso, Mike Ervin, Lynn Manning, and Susan Nussbaum. These artists are prompting scholars to investigate how performance studies understands the disabled body and disability as an identity formation, how disability studies understands performance, and how the two fields might make common cause.

The bringing together of these two fields reveals each one's current limits and future possibilities. While the essays in this book apply disability perspectives to performance and performance perspectives to disability, they do not toe a party line, often reflecting different, or even opposing, positions on common issues. The aim of this book is to retain the radical (if ragged) edges of each field, even as they encounter one another. Because both disability and performance are intrinsically interdisciplinary concepts, the conversation between them inevitably includes other disciplinary voices as well. Contributors to *Bodies in Commotion* come from the fields of English, theater, dance, anthropology, sociology, music, arts education, communication arts, women's studies, physical education, and philosophy. Each discipline has its own historical relationship to the concepts of disability and performance, relationships that remain palpable in these essays. These traces of earlier disciplinary formations are important benchmarks, as they indicate the ways in which both disability and performance throw traditional fields into commotion.

Disability Studies and Performance Studies A Brief Genealogy

Disability studies has emerged only in the last twenty-five years or so, beginning as an interdisciplinary endeavor of the social sciences, humanities, and medicine. Only in the past ten years have the arts joined the conversation to any significant degree. Earlier scholars within disability studies looked askance at the arts, seeing them mainly as purveyors of negative images of people with disabilities. It seemed that most of those in the visual arts, dance, music, and theater who were involved with disabled people were the nondisabled interested in applying the arts as therapy. Art as therapy held little interest for many disability scholars who were diligently redefining disability as a minority culture, peeling away the label of pathology with its concomitant demand for cure.

Performance studies has likewise emerged as an interdisciplinary endeavor over the past twenty years. Performance studies arose initially from conversations among scholars whose primary affiliations were with theater studies, anthropology, communication, and sociology.¹³ Although

certain American and British anthropologists and sociologists had used theatrical metaphors as ways of understanding their objects of study at least since the 1950s, the field of theater studies had taken little notice of this work, and the anthropologists and sociologists themselves had not examined in depth the implications of performance metaphors. Performance studies was conceived as a cross-disciplinary platform on which these fields could explore their common ground.

Performance studies has been informed by many other disciplines since that initial formulation; the current turn is toward a model strongly inflected by developments in cultural studies. It now provides a home for the study of a wide variety of performative phenomena in the arts, everyday life, popular culture, technology, and the media, using lenses provided by performance theory, identity politics, psychoanalytical theory, and media studies.

Partly because of the strong influence of feminist discourse, performance studies has long taken the performing body as one of its central objects. Despite their concern with identity politics, however, performance scholars traditionally paid little attention to people with disabilities as a minoritarian identity. Performance studies has generally assumed the body it studies is a normative one. Disability, unlike race, class, and gender, escaped recognition as an important identity rubric for performance scholars. Whereas those involved in using the arts therapeutically have formulated a concept of disability, albeit a contested one, performance studies—out of negligence rather than overt hostility toward disabled people or disability studies—has had no such concept.

Since disability studies is implicitly conceptualized as the study of a group of people (a very large group, since most of us are, or will be, disabled to one degree or another) and performance studies addresses a concept that transcends group identifications, the two fields are not based in similar epistemologies. As emerging interdisciplines, however, both have confronted problems of definition and distinction because of disciplines out of which they developed. Medicine and the social sciences, for example, have considered the disabled a problem population who possess conditions needing amelioration and cure. To this received concept disability rights activists have advanced alternatives commonly referred to as the *social-construction model* and the *minority model*.¹⁴ They are central to disability studies.

Activists developed and advanced these models during the Civil Rights era in the United States, rallying to the cry, “Nothing about us without us”—a demand for disabled people’s leadership in anything having to do with disability. Activists insisted that disability is not situated within pathological individuals in need of medical care and cure (the medical model)

but is a fundamentally social phenomenon. The social-construction model locates disability within a society built for nondisabled people. Disability is a disjuncture between the body and the environment. It is the stairway in front of the wheelchair user, or written text in front of the blind person, that handicaps an individual, not the physical impairment itself. Scholars using the social-construction model have demonstrated that disability's meaning and expression (i.e., discourses of disability) change over time according to cultural, religious, political, architectural, attitudinal, and economic factors.

The minority model extends the social-construction premise that disability is a mutable category by self-consciously crafting a new disability identity. In this view, the disabled become a distinct minority community that has been excluded from full participation in society because of discrimination in education, employment, and architectural access. This community is defined by shared experiences of discrimination and by its vital subculture, including the arts. Both of these models were deployed explicitly and implicitly in the passage of landmark U.S. civil rights legislation, beginning with Sections 501–4 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and culminating in the Americans with Disabilities Act (or ADA) of 1990. These legislative coups would not have been possible without activists', artists', and scholars' insistence on new ways of considering disability.¹⁵

Although Deaf people have long considered themselves part of a separate world with its own language, history, and customs, people with disabilities have begun to think of themselves as a minority culture only in the past thirty years or so. Deaf culture (or DEAF-WORLD)¹⁶ ardently rejects the notion that deafness is an impairment, and therefore members do not consider themselves disabled. Nevertheless, we have chosen to include essays about Deaf performance practices in this collection because they engage in important debates about the contingency of disability identity (especially considering that many hearing-impaired people do not use sign languages and consider themselves disabled), provide a model for alternative aesthetics based on somatic difference, and suggest methods of “translation” between cultures via various forms of interpretation.¹⁷

Like disability studies, performance studies in its initial formulation offered alternatives to the models of inquiry favored by its parent disciplines, particularly the understanding of theater and ritual put forth by theater scholars. Whereas the traditional view was that theater evolved out of ritual, which was implicitly posited as a less developed cultural form, Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, the main founders of performance studies, called for a revisionist approach that sees ritual and theater as related but different forms of performance, each with its own development.¹⁸ This approach led to the investigation of many forms of perfor-

mance; although theater and ritual remained dominant paradigms in this investigation, theatrical and ritual performances enjoyed no special privilege as objects of inquiry. Insights from sociologist Erving Goffman, who looked at everyday behavior as theater, were factored in, and the range of activities to be studied as performance expanded to include events outside the aesthetic realm.

Whereas theater studies, as exemplified by theater history, has been divided into subfields along traditional geographic, national, and, occasionally, ethnic lines, performance studies is inherently comparatist. In its quest for a “general theory of performance”¹⁹ across these boundary lines, performance studies produced a supple paradigm that is applicable to many different human undertakings. That same quest initially de-emphasized the characteristics of performances that make them different from one another, in favor of those they have in common. Until the impact of feminism was felt on performance studies in the 1980s, it tended not to acknowledge the particularities of embodiment, implicitly accepting the assumption that the performer’s body is a neutral “somatic support”²⁰ for the signifying practices of the performance in question. Since the 1980s, performance studies has become much more attentive to the relationship between performance and specific cultural identities, particularly in relation to feminism, queer theory, African American studies, and, more recently, Latino/a culture.

As this brief review suggests, developments in both fields have set the stage for the dialogue between disability studies and performance studies undertaken here. To think of disabled people as a minoritarian culture entails considering how that identity is performed both in everyday life and in theatrically framed events that contribute to the self-conscious expression of that identity. Performance studies provides tools for both levels of inquiry; to focus on disability culture through performance studies is also to raise questions asked all too infrequently.

At one level, the question of disability is a question of the deployment of bodies in space, the question of which deployments are normative and which are not, together with the articulation and enforcement of norms. At another level, because of their unique cultural and somatic experiences, disabled bodies relate to and define space differently than normative bodies. Performance provides a valuable conceptual model for the consideration of disability because it, too, is fundamentally about the deployment of bodies in space. The intellectual paradigm of performance that is evolving within performance studies can be applied as readily to representations of the disabled on stage as to the functioning of disabled bodies in daily life and the ways in which disabled people choose to represent themselves in both art and social action.

Similarly, to think of disability not as a physical condition but as a way of interacting with a world that is frequently inhospitable is to think of disability in performative terms—as something one *does* rather than something one *is*. This perspective is central to performance studies, which incorporated Goffman’s notions of how identity and selfhood are performed in everyday life. Although performance studies has largely neglected disability as an identity category, its basic approaches are highly relevant to an investigation of how disabled identities are experienced and expressed.

Co-motion

While the word *commotion* denotes “disturbance” and “unruliness,” a secondary meaning of the word is “moving together.” Taken as a whole, the essays in this book suggest how an encounter between disability studies and performance studies might move both disciplines forward, together. The essays collected in *Bodies in Commotion* reflect both the range of performances to which a disability perspective may be applied and the wide variety of approaches and methods that contribute to disability perspectives themselves. The authors’ objects of study range from canonical and contemporary dramas to everyday interactions seen as performance, to performances that articulate disability through technology and engage overtly with the politics of disability and representation, to performances not apparently thus engaged but interpreted afresh to bring out their connections to disability. The variety of methods and approaches reflects disability studies’ and performance studies’ development out of the arts, humanities, and the social sciences. The methods represented here include art production, case studies, literary analysis, performance criticism, rhetorics, ethnography, historical genealogy, and qualitative research.

Because *Bodies in Commotion* is the first collection to bring these two fields into sustained dialogue, we have opted to include the widest variety of perspectives possible.²¹ We asked contributors to focus tightly on a central issue, as a means of raising the widest range of questions for future research. Part 1, “Taxonomies: Disability and Deaf Performances in the Process of Self-Definition,” includes essays that map out current representational strategies and thematic trends in disability and Deaf performance. Part 2, “Disability/Deaf Aesthetics, Audiences, and the Public Sphere,” explores the politics involved in shifting aesthetic practices for both mainstream and disability cultures. Part 3, “Rehabilitating the Medical Model,” looks at how artists work both with and against medicalized notions of disability. The contributors to part 4, “Performing Disability in Daily Life,”

analyze performances of disability outside of artistic or aesthetic contexts. And finally, part 5, “Reading Disability in Dramatic Literature,” engages the representation of in disability in drama from a disability perspective.

Notes

1. Carrie Sandahl addresses this issue in “Ahhhh, Freak Out! Metaphors of Disability and Femaleness in Performance,” *Theatre Topics* 9, no. 1 (1999): 11–30.

2. These “passersby” are not necessarily able-bodied. Disabled people are not exempt from these cultural codes.

3. Our thinking about staring has been influenced by Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s essay in this collection.

4. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disabilities and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 6.

5. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor, 1959); and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

6. John Belluso, interview by Carrie Sandahl, Los Angeles, July 2, 2001.

7. Joseph Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 43.

8. We are borrowing terms and paraphrasing definitions of these stereotypes as laid out by disability film scholar Martin Norden in his book *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994); disability historian Paul Longmore in “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures,” *Social Policy* 16 (summer 1985): 31–37; and disability art critic David Hevey, *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

9. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 54.

10. Petra Koppers, “Deconstructing Images: Performing Disability,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 11, nos. 3–4 (2001): 26.

11. Catherine Cole, “Artist’s Statement,” <http://www.fivefootfeat.com>, accessed August 8, 2003.

12. Analyses of freak-show performance appear in Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) and her edited collection *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). In *Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1999), Brenda Brueggemann includes analyses of Deaf theater and performance art.

13. For a useful genealogy of performance studies, see Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London: Routledge, 2001), especially 29–53.

14. We specify that these models are U.S.-based, as similar terms are understood differently by U.K.-based disability scholars. For useful explanations of the differences between U.S. and U.K. models of disability see Lennard J. Davis, “The End of Identity Politics and the Beginning of Dismodernism: On Disability as an Unstable Category,” in *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

15. For full discussions of this paradigm shift and its relationship to the disability civil rights movement, see Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Shapiro, *No Pity*; and Doris Zames Fleischer and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

16. This collection will comply with conventions that use “deaf” to describe anyone with a significant auditory impairment and “Deaf” to describe people belonging to a linguistic minority culture with its own language (American Sign Language in the United States), values, customs, artistic practices, and history. The term “DEAF-WORLD” refers to Deaf culture worldwide. In this collection, words or phrases appearing in all capital letters with hyphens between words are English glosses of American Sign Language (ASL). Because ASL is not a word-for-word translation of English and has its own syntax, grammar, and concepts, a gloss is the closest English word translation for specific signs. Thus, an English word in a gloss may only approximate a complex sign in ASL. The hyphen indicates a relationship between the signed concepts and makes apparent the grammatical and structural difference between ASL and English.

17. For more on Deaf culture, see Harlan Hahn’s *A Journey into a DEAF-WORLD* (San Diego: DawnSignPress, 1996).

18. See Richard Schechner, “Approaches,” in *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 1–34.

19. This phrase is Jon McKenzie’s in *Perform or Else*.

20. Wladimir Kryszinski, “Semiotic Modalities of the Body in Modern Theater,” *Poetics Today* 2–3 (1981): 141.

21. Our aim with this collection is to document current conversations about disability performance. A complete survey of contemporary disabled performing artists themselves is beyond the scope of our project.