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## Embodiment

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One of the earliest goals of disability studies was to expose the various methods by which some bodies are marked as different and deviant while others are marked as normal. Disability studies scholarship focused on medicalization, rehabilitation, segregation, institutionalization, sterilization, and genocide demonstrated how such practices were instrumental to ideas of normalization and deviance. More recently, however, disability scholarship and disability culture more broadly have turned away from forces of institutionalization or medicalization to explore the relationship between disability and the concept of “embodiment.” Embodiment is a way of thinking about bodily experience that is not engaged solely with recovering the historical mistreatment of disabled people. Rather, it includes pleasures, pain, suffering, sensorial and sensual engagements with the world, vulnerabilities, capabilities, and constraints as they arise within specific times and places.

Although embodiment sometimes serves as a synonym for corporeality—the state of living in/through/ as a body—disability studies scholars have tended to use the term in relation to phenomenology, the philosophical study of conscious experience from an individual person’s subjective perspective. This approach to the concept of embodiment is intended to serve as a corrective to Cartesian dualism, the historic Western legacy derived from the French philosopher René Descartes that posits a strict dichotomy between mind and body

in which the former assumes rational control over the latter's messiness and irrationality. Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, for instance, affirms the political value of discrete and rational independent subjects who are the authors of their own existence. Hobbes regarded "men as mushrooms," originating out of nothing, born of no woman (Benhabib 1992, 156), thereby implying that by being "self-made" some men could achieve rational control of mind over body. Many disability studies scholars have suggested that Hobbes's definition of personhood is a normative fantasy of the physically and cognitively privileged.

Feminist phenomenology engages with ideas of rationality and body to understand embodiment as a form of gendered experience. This approach to phenomenology, which takes its cues from Edmund Husserl and Simone de Beauvoir, understands embodiment as a form of subjectivity that is manifested bodily, a ground of intentional activity and the means of encountering the world. Feminist phenomenology's version of embodiment reveals how bodily normativity is coded as masculine and constant. Bodily changes—such as aging, menstruation, menopause, or pregnancy—are regarded as forms of risk, disturbance, or breakdown, and irrationality (as in the womb-related derivation of the word "hysteria"). Seen through the lens of disability studies, embodiment frames bodily change as a horizon for self-understanding and self-definition, and the body as an agent interacting with others and with the world more generally (Weiss 1999).

Embodied disability perspectives not only generate incisive critiques of social norms and practices; they are also the basis for understanding and critiquing other areas of philosophical inquiry such as ontology, epistemology, political economy, and aesthetics. Along with feminist, postcolonial, and critical race approaches to embodiment, disability studies offers a distinct

departure from Western liberalism's understanding of personhood as rational and disembodied. Taken together, these perspectives produce a radical cultural/material politics of disability while bringing new insights to the phenomenology of embodiment more generally. Indeed, a disability studies approach to embodiment contributes significantly to intersectional critiques of liberal individualism as expressed (or, rather, embodied) historically in the interests and expectations, all normative and invisible, of able-bodied white bourgeois heterosexual men.

Many disability theorists insist on a pluralistic understanding of embodiments as multiple, intersectional, and interdependent. Some clearly convey that individuals experience forms of interdependence that often shift and change over time, rather than strict independence (Panzarino 1994). The survival and well-being of human bodies, they argue, require extensive networks that orchestrate caregiving, personal assistance, and many other forms of labor (Kittay 1999). Witness, for example, the dehumanization of people who rely on feeding tubes or feeding assistance. Bodies that require nonnormative means of taking nourishment risk a socially imposed loss of personhood (Gerber 2007; Wilkerson 2011). Theories of interdependence and collaboration repudiate the concept of autonomy and control over one's body as authentic measures of personhood and expand normative definitions of what constitutes social and political inclusion.

Disability-informed theories of embodiment also provide the basis for rethinking the parameters of selfhood and identity, especially in relation to caregivers and prosthetic devices (Bost 2008, 358). Some Latina feminist narratives, for example, are structured by a critical sensibility of chronic illnesses such as AIDS and diabetes. "Bodily matter" and "its friction against existing material boundaries" demonstrate that "the

language of illness provides a metaphor for politics based on wounds and connections rather than universalizing identities” (Bost 2008, 353). While disability itself is not synonymous with illness—a significant insight of disability culture and activism—illnesses and wounds can serve to ground a radical disability politics. Their material presence can unsettle abstract and totalizing identity categories—the idea of “health” and “illness” as diametrically opposite rather than mutually reinforcing—while also fostering solidarity and coalition against ableist and otherwise oppressive social definitions of normalcy.

Disability narratives involving chronic illness often rely on embodiment to establish a sense of identity “predicated on fluid boundaries” (Lindgren 2004, 159). They convey a phenomenological sense of illness as “uncannily both me and not-me,” suggesting possibilities for “models of identity that incorporate difference” (159). In addition, disability perspectives significantly advance the phenomenological concept of “intercorporeality,” which “emphasizes that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies” (Weiss 1999, 5). Intercorporeality, as a concept, allows scholars to pay close attention to the dynamics of care relations (Kittay 1999), prosthetic relations between bodies and medical devices, and other forms of social and technological interdependence.

Disability intercorporealities also have the capacity to “crip” conventional understandings of kinship. For instance, families with disabled children are “rewriting kinship” and finding routes to collective action through shared resistance to public policies and cultural norms that devalue or marginalize disabled relatives, or that pressure women to abort disabled fetuses (Rapp and Ginsburg 2001). Queer disability narratives also rewrite

kinship in new ways, including Latina feminist notions of “queer *familia*” as a condition for survival and connection (Bost 2008, 355; Panzarino 1994). Disability theories of intercorporeality also attend to new forms of “embodied pleasure,” such as the “bodily attunement” of a child and occupational therapist who are both engaged in the poetics of autistic speech and movement (Park 2010).

Disabled embodiment provides epistemological resources for working through vexed questions of suffering and impairment. A phenomenologically grounded notion of embodiment can generate knowledge of pain as suffused with social meaning. Indeed, for some scholars, a focus on embodiment entails respect for experiences of suffering (Lindgren 2004, 151). At the same time, focusing on illness and suffering can “expand one’s sense of embodiment” (Bost 2008, 350) through, for example, opening up an experience of physical pain as a channel of vital knowledge that can include politically radical possibilities.

In recent years, disability-informed theories of embodiment grounded in political economy have inspired analyses of globalization. In these approaches to embodiment, disability is understood as materially and geographically based, rather than a mere effect of discourse or flaws located within individual bodies or minds, as dominant paradigms of globalization would have it (Davidson 2008, xviii). Embodiment becomes a mode of material/cultural analysis that illuminates “the political economy of difference” (Erevelles 2001, 99) by attending to whose bodies are affected, and how, as capitalist profit imperatives meet changing labor and market structures. Work in this area of disability studies ranges from critiques of “disembodied citizenship” and the global organ trade (Davidson 2008) to analyses of political subjecthood in late capitalism (Erevelles 2001), to examinations of the global agro-industrial food

system and claims of an obesity pandemic (Wilkerson 2011), and the neoliberal demand for flexible bodies (McRuer 2006). Such work advances disability studies' imperative to situate embodiment within specific environments and attend closely to material circumstances.

Finally, disability perspectives on embodiment have also produced a generative and critical aesthetics. Disabled embodiment refutes social conceptions of disability as pathology and social norms of productivity by providing "different conceptions of the erotic body" that contest hegemonic notions of beauty and vitality (Siebers 2008a, 302). Thus, thinking critically about embodiment helps facilitate the politically radical potential of a "critical disability aesthetics" to create identifications beyond normative notions of bodies, lives, and persons (Davidson 2008, xvii). As a result, the embodied experiential knowledge of disabled people has become a fundamental resource for disability cultures and modes of disability activism: as the late Latina feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa once observed, "Along with your dreams the body's the royal road to consciousness" (Bost 2008, 350).