SCMS

IN FOCUS: Cripping Cinema and Media Studies

Introduction

by Robert McRuer, editor

In 1985, the historian Paul Longmore identified the convergence of disability and media as one long process of "screening stereotypes."[1] Attentive to the ways disabled people were consistently represented in film, in particular, as either angry and evil villains or inspirational figures for able-bodied characters and viewers, Longmore initiated what might be understood as a "crip" tradition of critiquing, from within disability culture, the impoverished representations that dominant filmic and media forms have bequeathed us. Disabled villains like Captain Hook or Magneto are generally defeated and eliminated at film's end, whereas inspirational figures tend either to "overcome" their disability or to end up dead after dutifully changing for the better the lives of everyone around them. Neither filmic tendency, of course, could offer more than a two-dimensional engagement with disability, although Longmore did note the promise for a more textured engagement with disability that attended other visual forms, including television and even advertising.

Crip theory has emerged over the past few decades as a critical project, closely allied with queer theory, that centers atypical bodies, minds, and behaviors while interrogating that which can never be contained or described neatly by an entirely historical and limited abled-disabled binary. As a noun or adjective, "crip" is of course a flamboyant reclamation, one that disabled activists, artists, and theorists have long used to signify solidarity and resistance far in excess of the mobility impairment seemingly invoked by stigmatizing and pitying uses of "cripple."[2] As a verb, as I have suggested

1 Paul Longmore, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People," *Social Policy* 16 (Summer 1985): 31.

2 See Robert McRuer, "Crip," in *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*, ed. Kelly Fritsch, Clare O'Connor, and A. K. Thompson (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2016), 119–125.

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elsewhere: "'To crip,' like 'to queer,' gets at processes that unsettle, or processes that make strange or twisted. "Cripping' also exposes the ways in which able-bodiedness and able-mindedness get naturalized and the ways that bodies, minds, and impairments that should be at the absolute center of a space or issue or discussion get purged from that space or issue or discussion."[3] Dominant forms of cinema and media, as Longmore's analysis showed, have long been tools for the naturalization of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness and have contributed greatly to purging critical reflections on disability from scholarship in cinema and media studies. By "cripping cinema and media studies" in this special edition of In Focus, the scholars gathered here work to counter those tendencies. They do so, additionally, by attending to some of the most exciting, cutting-edge work in disability studies, such as the field's engagement with globalization, ecotheory and animal studies, debility studies, critical race theory, and what might be understood—following the 2010 publication of Margaret Price's *Mad at School*—as a "mad turn" in disability studies, a turn that is attentive in new ways to disabilities that are not necessarily physical. Price provides an extended consideration of various terms that are in circulation in multivalent ways in disability communities, including "neurodiversity" and "mental illness," and ultimately uses "mental disability" throughout her own study as a term that "can include not only madness, but also cognitive and intellectual disabilities of various kinds." She also makes clear that the term can function for "'physical' illnesses [that are] accompanied by mental effects."[4] The work of Price and others, including some of those included in this In Focus, has shifted the field to a point where mental disability is a necessary, central component of our analyses of disability and culture.

In his study *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*, communications scholar Martin F. Norden codified Longmore's approach to cinema and disability by cataloging representations of physical disability in film from the origins of cinema to the late twentieth century.[5] Although Norden's broad overview did not allow for an "in focus" approach to the films he surveyed, he did provide the growing interdisciplinary field of disability studies with a central thesis, namely that disability in dominant media forms invariably materializes for viewers an experience of extreme isolation. Like a movie theater that generates "accessible" space by removing one or two seats, thereby materializing literally the idea that perhaps one wheelchair user might show up, what Norden termed a "cinema of isolation" both reflects and perpetuates a cultural mind-set incapable of attending to the collective generativity of disability culture and community.

This In Focus dossier encourages cinema and media studies scholars to think otherwise. A consideration of the intersections of disability or crip theory and cinema and media studies remains underdeveloped, but the brief essays collected here build on the extant scholarly work that has already moved us beyond the initial, tentative theses

3 Robert McRuer, *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 23.

4 Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 19.

5 Martin F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

put forward by Longmore and Norden. Near the end of his field-defining 1995 book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, Lennard J. Davis, citing Norden, points out that the film industry "has been obsessed with the depiction of the disabled body from the earliest silent films. The blind, the deaf, and the physically disabled were singled out from the very beginning of cinema."[6] Davis's observation implies that the system of "normalcy" he excavates has literally depended on cinema and media.

In the twenty-first century, scholars have analyzed and critiqued the interdependent relations of normalcy and cinema in increasingly sophisticated and specific ways. In 2003, Michael Davidson suggested that disabled bodies in film noir function as "phantom limbs" for proscribed, often queer stories that cinema cannot avow.[7] A few years later, building on Linda Williams's work on "film bodies," where Williams focused on "gender, genre, and excess," Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell excavated how various "body genres," including comedy, horror, and romance, differentially make use of disability narratives, generally in negative ways.[8] Snyder and Mitchell, conversely, have generated important scholarship detailing the cultural work of independent and international disability film festivals, attending both to the possibilities afforded by alternative filmmaking practices and to what happens to the spaces in which films are screened when the cinema of isolation is negated and those spaces are reimagined and reconstructed to welcome people with many different disabilities.[9] My own elaboration of what the project of crip theory might look like (in the 2006 book of the same name) locates film as a primary site for the consolidation of structures of what I term "compulsory able-bodiedness." Sally Chivers, in her 2011 study *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema*, particularly attends to the complex ways in which aging bodies are prime examples of what she and Nicole Markotić have elsewhere termed "the problem body."[10] Georgina Kleege has brilliantly considered the experience of being blind at the movies, recognizing that cinematic forms often experiment with both color and sound in ways that make film viewing a rich sensory experience for blind or low-vision viewers, even as (again) dominant media representations of blindness invariably both construct a spectacle for sighted viewers and unconsciously imagine that blind audience members have no place in the cinema.[11] More recently, the groundbreaking 2017 volume *Disability Media Studies*, edited by Elizabeth Ellcessor and

6 Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 152.

7 Michael Davidson, "Phantom Limbs: Film Noir and the Disabled Body," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, nos. 1–2 (2003): 57–77.

8 Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 2–13; Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, "Body Genres: An Anatomy of Disability in Film," in *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*, ed. Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 179–205.

9 Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, "How Do We Get All These Disabilities in Here? Disability Film Festivals and the Politics of Atypicality," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 11–29.

10 Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Sally Chivers, *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Chivers and Markotić, *Problem Body*.

11 Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 43–66.

Bill Kirkpatrick, overviews the ways in which disability media studies more broadly is emerging as a vibrant and important area of scholarly inquiry.[12]

In their contribution to this In Focus, Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick continue the work they began in *Disability Media Studies*, offering a disabled manifesto for the future of the field. They note that cinema and media studies have undergone multiple transformations over the decades; many of these were driven by changes in media technologies and structures, but the most profound have occurred when the field opened itself up to alternative ways of knowing and being. Most notably, the incorporation of feminist theory, critical race studies, queer theory, and postcolonial and global perspectives radically expanded our understanding of media and society, improved our ability to identify and critique the workings of power, and broadened our appreciation of how people with a diverse range of embodiments, identities, and subject positions engage with media technologies, industries, and texts. Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick argue that the field is undergoing a similar transformation through its encounter with disability studies, and they offer an expansive opening to the essays that follow this introduction, considering the ways that incorporating disability into our disciplinary self-understanding and working knowledges will strengthen and expand our understanding of cinema and media and their ability to effect social change.

The essays that follow Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick build on their attention to alternative, crip ways of knowing and being. Carrie Sandahl's contribution, considering her own film and media-making work with the disability community, both textures the crip critique inaugurated years ago by Longmore and Norden and gestures toward the cinematic production of disabled counterpoints. Sandahl focuses on the collaborative production of the feature-length, forthcoming documentary *Code of the Freaks*. Over nearly a decade, Sandahl and the rest of the creative team behind *Code of the Freaks* conducted research that included archival work and community salons that later helped them organize often hugely comedic film montages around such themes as the saintly but dying disabled figure. With critical analysis and thoughtful discussion, *Code of the Freaks* dissects a hundred-year span of movie clips to lay bare Hollywood's formulaic portrayals of disability.

Mitchell and Snyder's contribution affirms the ways in which disability epistemologies and ontologies provide us with alternative perspectives and subjectivities for navigating and changing an ableist world. Their essay, and Kateřina Kolářová's that follows, in some ways takes up one of the challenges implicit in Sandahl's: both essays engage with extremely compromised media forms, or texts that have been explicitly critiqued (sometimes vociferously) by disability communities.

Mitchell and Snyder take as their object of analysis Guillermo del Toro's 2018 Best Picture Oscar winner, *The Shape of Water*, which disability social media tended to dismiss quickly as the unnatural love affair between a mute woman and an amphibious, genderqueer creature. Mitchell and Snyder, however, engage in a long-standing crip and queer practice of reading celebrated visual texts against the grain. They ask whether an alternative reading of the award-winning film might encourage us to

12 Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick, eds., *Disability Media Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

reflect on the connections between the wide range of bodies, human and nonhuman, that compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality would contain, control, or eliminate. Their analysis makes clear for cinema and media studies scholars the ways in which disability studies is currently engaging new materialism, posthumanism, and animal studies in a "materialist turn," essentially welcoming alternative genres of the human. I have elsewhere theorized these alternatives as "emergent disabilities"; I use the term to refer both to problematic, highly commodified neoliberal celebrations of disability (the Paralympics, high-profile Hollywood films such as *The King's Speech* [Tom Hooper, 2010]) and to new disability activist coalitions that have materialized in the wake of increasing precarity, such as that caused by global austerity politics.[13] The welcoming that Mitchell and Snyder advance ultimately reverberates with this focus on emergent disability coalitions and with other new materialist work.

Kolářová likewise attends to compromised texts in a shifting geopolitical landscape. Engaging the cinematographic oeuvre of Wiktor Grodecki, a US-based Polish émigré who was drawn back to Eastern Europe in the mid-1990s by the subject of male-male sex work, Kolářová concedes that his films create a problematic and conflictual archive, an archive that reveals its complicity with dominant epistemic frameworks of homophobic homosexual panic, racialized and white nationalism, and the stigmaphobic abjection of disability—HIV/AIDS specifically. Yet reading two of Grodecki's documentaries (*Not Angels but Angels*, 1994; and *Body without Soul*, 1996) against the grain, Kolářová asks whether these thoroughly compromised and melodramatic texts also provide viewers with historical traces of the ways in which exploited laborers, including domestic, sexual, affective, and "otherwise devalued" workers, have been outsourced by transnational capitalism from Eastern Europe in the postsocialist era. Kolářová's essay spotlights how compromised texts are produced not only at the supposed center (i.e., Hollywood) but also at the supposed margins of global media production—and yet those margins can and must be read in queer, crip-resistant ways.

Finally, Markotić's essay most firmly locates us at the center of the turn disability studies has made toward considering disabilities that are not obviously physical. In an essay that calls to mind the work of J. Jack Halberstam on Pixar-produced media, Markotić examines the children's film *Inside Out* (2015), written and directed by Pete Docter, in which an eleven-year-old girl, Riley, becomes unhappy when her family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco.[14] Riley's sadness develops into depression. The film represents her as being managed by five distinct sensations, each one serving a different emotional purpose. Over the course of the film, Joy and Sadness go on an adventure through Riley's mind to recover her happy memories. It is only when Riley embraces her sadness that she becomes better equipped to welcome the multiplicity of at times seemingly discordant affects and intensities. Sadness, in the film, ultimately becomes a way to navigate and live through and beyond depression.

Markotić's analysis, along with all the essays in this In Focus, demonstrates that an attention to emergent disabilities in cinema and media studies can provide us with not only new objects of analysis but also new ways of approaching devalued disabled and

13 McRuer, *Crip Times*, 35–36.

14 See J. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

crip experiences. Collectively, these essays generate for cinema and media studies what Kolářová has elsewhere termed "crip signing"—that is, a mode of analysis that always gestures toward other possibilities for producing, consuming, reading, and interacting with disability representation.[15] Crip signing is necessarily invitational, and this In Focus is thus an invitation for other scholars to think more expansively about the ways in which disability has been an unacknowledged but central aspect of most forms of cinema and media for more than a century, and to think about how cripping cinema and media studies might reshape the field in the future. ✻

15 Kateřina Kolářová, "The Inarticulate Post-Socialist Crip: On the Cruel Optimism of Neoliberal Transformations in the Czech Republic," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 3 (2014): 257–274.

Studying Disability for a Better Cinema and Media Studies

by Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick

If you are reading this, you are probably already on board with the study of difference. Gender, critical race theory, class analyses, postcolonialism, or queer studies are a part of your scholarship, or at least a grace note in your graduate education. (If you are not reading this, let us take a moment to say that you should be. You're missing much of the most exciting work in cinema and media studies.)

Despite your best intentions, however, you may not have encountered critical studies of media and disability in any meaningful way. It is not just missing from our scholarship; there are few job calls for experts in media and disability, precious few graduate seminars, rarely even a unit on disability in undergraduate courses. Disability is not listed as an area of expertise when you join SCMS or as a keyword when you submit to its conference. Disability largely remains what Goggin and Newell fifteen years ago identified as a "lacuna" in our field.[1]

Rather than bemoan this state of affairs, we pose a challenge: start incorporating disability into your work. We call for a disability media studies that advances the field by integrating disability and able-bodiedness as a category of analysis for film and media scholars.[2]

1 Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell, *Digital Disability: The Social Construction of Disability in New Media* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 115.

2 May we modestly suggest, as a starting point, Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick, eds., *Disability Media Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

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Like feminist film and media theory, a disability perspective is not primarily about the study of representations. Over thirty years ago, Joan Scott had to explain to her colleagues that a gender perspective is not primarily about the ontology of sex differences; similarly, we want colleagues to realize that disability is not the ontology of impairment but, borrowing Scott's phrase, "a primary way of signifying relationships of power."[3] We are not simply looking for "the cripple in the text"; we are interrogating the dynamics of power and normalization that produce certain kinds of bodies, sensoriums, and cognitivities as "able, normal, better" and others as "disabled, abnormal, worse."

A disability perspective, then, is about decentering the physically and cognitively "normal" character, the "normal" viewer, the "normal" producer, and so on; this has profound consequences for the study of media texts, industrial practices, social relations, media policies, modes of reception, and the design of technologies and spaces. It is about rethinking the stories told, the writers and actors hired, the economics of industries, the politics of access and representation, and the range of possible readings (think "cripping the text" as analogous to "queering the text"). It is about listening to new voices and engaging in new political struggles over power and privilege.

Disability raises fascinating new questions, offers intellectually compelling new perspectives, and reveals exciting new insights about media and society. Cinema and media studies as a whole can benefit if disability is better integrated into our working knowledges, routine frames of analysis, standard professional and pedagogical categories, curricula, and understandings of the archive. As the essays in this In Focus—and a growing body of scholarship elsewhere—abundantly demonstrate, the transformation is already under way.

Here, then, are some ways that a disability lens can help transform cinema and media studies into a better version of itself.

"Disability" Is an Operation of Power. When most people hear "disability," they imagine an ontological medical impairment that, in an ideal world, would be "fixed." In contrast, scholars in disability studies understand disability as a condition of difference that has been produced through discourse, by the built environment, and through social relations.[4] The classic example: a wheelchair user is not inherently "disabled" but rather is produced as "disabled" in the absence of ramps—a social and political choice. What is hegemonically understood as the normal, able body is, in this view, simply the "normate," Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's term for a privileged body, without stigma, that functions as a universal and unmarked type in a given society (analogous to "cis" in queer theory).[5]

3 Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1067.

4 There is a robust literature theorizing disability beyond medical models. See, e.g., Michael Oliver, *Social Work with Disabled People* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1983); Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

5 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

By moving away from a singular medical model of disability that sees physical and cognitive difference as "impairment in need of a cure," and recognizing that all bodies are constructed and valuated according to shifting categories of deviation and difference, cinema and media studies can better grapple with the role of media in constructing normate "bodyminds" (entwinements of the mental and physical).[6] For instance, medicalized representations of the body—from X-rays to fitness-tracking apps—serve as mediated representations of what is a normal (or desirable) bodymind, and in doing so, they also produce visualized outliers and forms of deviance. These mediated categories are then made meaningful through the allocation of social and economic power according to different kinds of embodiments and cognitivities. What appears to be immutable difference turns out to be part of the processes of domination.

We have been here before. For example, most students come in thinking that race is essentially biological, so we introduce them to critical race theory. They imagine that sexuality is ahistorical, so we assign Foucault on the invention of the homosexual. Now it is time to challenge their—and our own—unexamined medicalization and stigmatization of different bodies and minds, helping them see the operations of power in "disability."

Disability Is Everywhere. Disability is relevant to whatever interests you as a scholar. It will not be central to everything, but like race, class, and gender, it will never be far away: ideas about disability and able-bodiedness routinely and often invisibly inform characterization and narrative, assumptions about audiences, aesthetics, policies, technologies, and so on.

For example, scholars interested in gender can benefit from recognizing how disability functions as a master narrative underlying gender constructions—mental disability as constitutive of femininity and physical disability as signifier of inadequate masculinity.[7] Analysts of film and television style can learn much from a disability perspective that examines how the "abnormal" body disrupts traditional approaches to shot scale and spatial relations in the frame.[8] Those studying labor, globalization, and/or the environment can better understand disability as an outcome of media production and consumption.[9] And this is just for starters; as more scholars pay attention to disability as a category of analysis, we can expect many more rich and rewarding insights into film and media. To paraphrase the historian Douglas Baynton, disability is everywhere once you begin looking for it.[10]

6 Lennard J. Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3–19. For more on bodyminds, see Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

7 See, e.g., D. Travers Scott and Meagan Bates, "'It's Not Just Sexism': Feminization and (Ab)Normalization in the Commercialization of Anxiety Disorders," in *Disability Media Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 152–173; Ellen Samuels, "Prosthetic Heroes: Curing Disabled Veterans in *Iron Man 3* and Beyond," in Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick, *Disability Media Studies*, 129–151.

8 See, e.g., José Alaniz, "Deafness in Russian Cinema: 1964–2005" (presentation, Global Histories of Disability, Washington, DC, July 13, 2018).

9 See, e.g., Toby Miller, "The Price of the Popular Media Is Paid by the Effluent Citizen," in *Disability Media Studies*, 295–310.

10 Douglas Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in *The New Disability History*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umanski (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 52.

We Can Have Scholarship without Ableism. As several scholars have pointed out, a problematic ableism informs many of our core theories. McLuhan's "frankly ridiculous" rantings about media and "self-amputation," Sedgwick's limited understanding of stigma in *Epistemology of the Closet*, the ways that cyborg theory "has traditionally assumed a fully functioning human"—our field is rife with unquestioned ideas about the universality of the able-bodied subject and the undesirability of nonnormative bodies and minds.[11]

Disability media studies, in contrast, highlights the embodied nature of all moments of media production and consumption, a starting point that can lead us toward "new stories about media, new histories, but also new theories that do not rely on disability as their, well, crutch."[12] How much richer might media theory become if the variations and assemblages suggested by disabled experiences were taken as the foundation of, and not the exception to, the field?

Everyone Needs Access. When we consider disability, we are confronted with different modalities of media access and experience. This, in turn, can inform deeper analyses of the relationships among media content, interfaces, bodies, and circumstances that characterize any experience of media usage, production, or engagement. Importantly, no one "has" access to the media—it is always produced, limited, granted, and lost—yet cinema and media studies has too often left the moment of access untheorized and underexplored.

What is it, for instance, to "watch television"? Although scholars have investigated many components of televisual media and viewership, it is rare to see theorization of the mundane procedures by which someone accesses television: sitting, standing, punching tiny buttons on a remote, or remembering passwords for a streaming service. In such mundanities, it is impossible to miss variations of access. Disability is one such variation, and in its stark differences from "normal" viewing positions, it illuminates the possibilities of many other viewing positions and ways of access.

Disability Transforms Media History. Awareness of disability and the technologies, dedicated distribution and exhibition channels, and grassroots means by which people have engaged with media opens up new histories and new perspectives from which to consider canonical versions of film and media studies.

Captioned Films for the Deaf, for instance, was founded in 1949; for decades, it produced captions for educational and popular films and distributed them to "Deaf clubs" around the United States.[13] Meanwhile, Gallaudet (a university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students) has a long and possibly surprising history of radio clubs. There are entire histories of minority media production, postproduction, distribution,

11 The cited critique of McLuhan is in Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne, "Afterword II: Dismediation—Three Proposals, Six Tactics," in Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick, *Disability Media Studies*, 369; the critique of Sedgwick is from Tobin Siebers, "Disability as Masquerade," *Literature and Medicine* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 4; the problems with cyborg theory are discussed in Margaret M. Quinlan and Benjamin R. Bates, "*Bionic Woman* (2007): Gender, Disability and Cyborgs," *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* 9, no. 1 (2009): 51.

12 Mills and Sterne, "Afterword II," 370.

13 John S. Schuchman, *Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Entertainment Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

exhibition, and reception that remain so far largely unexplored. Digging into them will reveal a long and illuminating history of assistive technologies, media hacks, multitasking, repurposing, and community practice.

Disability Offers New Objects of Study. What is cinema and media studies? Disability points us toward new answers to that question. Media systems and representations are central to how we know and manage our bodies, and a disability perspective leads us to considerations of medical media, diagnostic media, assistive technologies, and hybridized consumer-medical devices like the Fitbit.[14] Such work is not entirely new, but our current moment demands more of it, including more conversations with medical humanities scholars who are wrestling with similar concerns about the representation and ontology of illness and impairment.[15]

Furthermore, people with disabilities are producing excellent creative work, and there are fascinating dimensions of film and media work connected to disability yet to explore. These include the labor of closed-captioning, the production of audiobooks as assistive and mainstream media, and other specialized paraindustries that serve disabled audiences, often through innovative uses of audiovisual media capabilities.[16]

The Media Industries Need a Disability Perspective, Too. The college classroom has long been a crucial site where future workers in the media industries are introduced to questions about power, access, and representation. But our work is not done, and disability is an important new frontier. For example, when nondisabled actors play (and commonly win awards for playing) disabled characters, it limits opportunities for disabled actors and affects the work in a range of problematic ways (analogous to nontrans* actors playing trans* characters). This is part of the larger scarcity of persons with disabilities at all levels in the industry, which in turn is connected to the ongoing retrograde representations of nonnormative bodies and minds. As with race, gender, and sexuality, our field needs to bring these issues to the attention of students if we want them to help effect long-term change.

We Must Expand the "Us." More women got into cinema and media studies when the field began opening up to questions of gender, thereby accelerating the transformations in our teaching and scholarship. Analogous expansions happened with people

14 Mack Hagood, "Disability and Biomediation: Tinnitus as Phantom Disability," in *Disability Media Studies*, 311–329; Amelie Hastie, "TV on the Brain," *Screen* 50, no. 2 (July 1, 2009): 216–232; Meryl Alper, *Giving Voice: Mobile Communication, Disability, and Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); Julie Passanante Elman, "'Find Your Fit': Wearable Technology and the Cultural Politics of Disability," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 10 (October 2018): 3760–3777.

15 For example, Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

16 In addition to work cited elsewhere in this essay, see Katie Ellis and Mike Kent, "Accessible Television," *First Monday* 20, no. 9 (September 10, 2015), https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/6170; Mara Mills, "What Should We Call Reading?," *Flow* (blog), December 3, 2012, https://www.flowjournal.org/2012/12/what-should-we-call-reading; David Parisi, "Game Interfaces as Disabling Infrastructures," *Analog Game Studies* 5, no. 2 (May 30, 2017), http://analoggamestudies.org/tag/disability-studies; Elizabeth Petrick, *Making Computers Accessible: Disability Rights and Digital Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Sean Zdenek, *Reading Sounds: Closed-Captioned Media and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

of color and queer scholars. With disability media studies, we can show students with disabilities that there is a place for them in our field, thereby diversifying the next generation of scholars. Furthermore, by considering disability as worthy of scholarly attention and moving away from ableist understandings of disability as "lack," we can create a better environment for academics who already identify as disabled.[17]

It helps to recognize that the fundamental practices of academia often revolve around assumptions of able-bodiedness. Anyone who has worked to caption a screening, teach editing to someone with a visual impairment, give a conference presentation in a technologically unfamiliar setting, or battle optical-character-recognition software to make a PDF accessible has encountered an intersection of media and disability in everyday professional practice. Furthermore, few universities provide adequate training in these skills—an additional reflection of the marginalization of disability that disproportionately affects our media-reliant field. Although these can be frustrating experiences, they can also be opportunities to consider the ways that everyone would benefit from more social and institutional support and from reforming our ableist structures and assumptions.

Conclusion. We hope that you recognize yourself and your ambitions in one or more of these points. Disability is not an additive or another list item to demonstrate our inclusivity, but a fundamental turn away from normate media studies. Disability studies and film and media studies have much to offer each other and much to contribute through their intersections. The fundamental shift we are calling for can produce further shifts in the kinds of questions and practices that are taken for granted in the field. The result will be a better cinema and media studies. *

17 Research on faculty with disabilities reveals a general lack of awareness of available accommodations, a reluctance to disclose disability (especially mental health conditions) to peers, and a host of small ways that the academy marginalizes disability experiences and expertise. See, e.g., Jay T. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, Laura T. Eisenman, and James M. Jones, eds., *Negotiating Disability: Disclosure and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Margaret Price, Mark S. Salzer, Amber O'Shea, and Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, "Disclosure of Mental Disability by College and University Faculty: The Negotiation of Accommodations, Supports, and Barriers," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2017), http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5487.

It's All the Same Movie: Making *Code of the Freaks*

by Carrie Sandahl

I have developed a reputation among my students as being a "disability wet blanket." Why? Because I "ruin movies" that feature disabled characters. Even though my students make these accusations with tongues firmly in check, I take them seriously as compliments and as evidence of the argument that all movies featuring disabled characters are essentially the same movie. Once they see this sameness, they cannot "unsee" it, and unless they develop resistant viewing strategies, these movies do tend to get ruined. Whether disabled characters at the purported center of these narratives are cured, killed, institutionalized, or heroicized, they all serve the same purpose: to inspire nondisabled characters or viewers, or both, to become better people through valuable lessons about life and love learned in their encounters with the disabled Other. Furthermore, the disabled character's purpose holds true across genre, rendering romance, horror, biopic, action-adventure, and drama practically interchangeable. What differs across specific characters, genres, and time periods are the particularities that these "lessons" teach the nondisabled, as the lessons are specific to the social anxieties of any given time. Disabled characters in mainstream movies reflect little of the interesting complexities of our actual lives. I am not arguing naïvely that the movies should correct this problem simply by representing disability experiences "authentically." Authenticity is never achievable in any case, and attempts at it can be, frankly, pretty boring. Although I do not believe that authenticity is achievable or even desirable, we can draw on authentic disability experiences and community to begin enlivening alternative representations. We can also learn from the disability community's viewing strategies to engage critically with existing disability-themed films, rescuing them from total ruin, and we can have fun doing so.

I am part of a collaborative behind the forthcoming feature-length documentary *Code of the Freaks* (Salome Chasnoff, 2019) that takes on the challenge of pointing out how disability functions as a narrative device in mainstream film and how these films affect actual disabled peoples' lives.[1] Our creative team includes the playwright and novelist

1 At the time of this publication, *Code of the Freaks* is in the final stages of production. Please visit our website, www.codeofthefreaks.com, for release information. We are also creating curricula for college-level classroom use and for community screenings.

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Susan Nussbaum, the disability studies scholar Alyson Patsavas, the feminist documentary film director Salome Chasnoff, and the independent filmmaker Jerzy Rose. Three members of the team identify as disabled themselves and are active members of disability communities. We call ourselves the "WPA" collective. The acronym stands for "What Pa did to Axel," a line from the almost-universally-hated-by-disabled-people movie *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2004).[2] In this movie, the paralyzed boxer Maggie (Hilary Swank) plaintively urges her trainer Frankie (Clint Eastwood) to do to her what Pa did to her pet dog, Axel. In close-up, Eastwood takes a moment to decode her request, his earnest blue eyes pondering while melodramatic music swells against the whooshing of her ventilator and the persistent beeping of her vitals machine. Suddenly, Frankie's face registers recognition: Maggie wants Frankie to "put her down." Without saying another word, Frankie's eyes communicate that killing Maggie is as logical and humane as putting down a dying dog, a logic that equates life with a disability to a death sentence. The WPA collective challenges the logic of such narratives; we channel the disability community's outrage over this film and others like it, calling out Hollywood for perpetuating the belief that it is better to be dead than disabled. When we show this short excerpt from *Million Dollar Baby* in *Code of the Freaks*, its melodrama practically parodies itself, exposing the narrative's weak yet pernicious logic.

Our documentary takes its name from Tod Browning's infamous 1932 movie, *Freaks*, which features a tight-knit community of sideshow freaks who seek revenge on the nondisabled circus performers who have done them wrong. Trapeze artist Cleopatra and her strongman lover, Hercules, have tricked Hans, a little person, into marrying Cleopatra; they have a plan to murder him and steal his inheritance after the wedding. When the freaks discover the couple's plan, they exact revenge by hunting down and mutilating their deceivers in the dark of a stormy night. We open our documentary with a scene from the film in which a carnival barker explains to an audience that surrounds the sideshow's newest human exhibit, the "chicken lady," how the freaks' revenge is responsible for her hideous deformity. He says, "Their code is a law unto themselves. Offend one, and you offend them all." Our framing of the documentary with this scene ominously implies that we as the filmmakers, our interviewees, and by extension the entire disability community have been offended and that we are enacting the code of the freaks: this documentary is our revenge. Our representational retribution deforms and "enfreaks" those movies that do us harm. The documentary acts as synecdoche for the disability community itself, which, despite a history fractured by institutionalization, isolation, and segregation, has emerged to build a political and cultural movement.

The film began when Susan Nussbaum, who was working at the Art and Culture Project of Chicago's Access Living, teamed up with director Salome Chasnoff to put on a salon on disability representation in film for members of the disability community. Nussbaum shares publicly that when she became disabled as a young woman, she had no context for understanding what her life would be like. Her only reference

2 A special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly*, for example, convened a special forum devoted to disability studies scholars' responses to the debates around *Million Dollar Baby*. Beth Haller and Corinne Kirchner, eds., "Disability Studies and Technology, Part 2; Freakery, Part 1," special issue, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2005), http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v25i3.

points were Hollywood movies, and the future these representations portended for her was bleak. Her favorite film to hate from this time was the campy classic *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962), in which wheelchair-using Blanche (Joan Crawford) is held hostage and tortured by her insanely jealous and grotesquely mascara-smeared sister, Jane (Bette Davis). In this movie, Jane deprives Blanche of food, water, and access to the outdoors. This movie also addresses institutionalization, as Jane's actions are motivated by the threat of being put into an asylum once Blanche sells their home. Nussbaum's story sets the tone for our project as a whole: the life-and-death seriousness of the movies' impact is exposed through biting humor. As audiences are made aware of the dire situation Nussbaum found herself in after her accident, we laugh along with her as she imagines herself as Blanche. This laughter, though, is haunted by the real threats of victimization, isolation, and institutionalization faced by the physically and mentally disabled of that time—and of ours.

In the initial salon, Nussbaum and Chasnoff presented a series of film clips and facilitated a discussion about disability stereotypes and how they affected lived experience. The program was so well received that Nussbaum and Chasnoff decided to make a documentary on Hollywood images of disability to extend these conversations. Patsavas and I were enlisted to join the group, bringing to the collective our experience teaching a large disability and American film class at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Over nearly a decade, the four of us conducted research that included literature reviews, archival work, community salons, and watching a lot of movies. The salons were held throughout the city of Chicago in a variety of spaces, including community centers, arts organizations, churches, and universities. We sought out diverse communities of disabled and nondisabled people across spectrums of class, race, and impairment type to ensure a wide variety of perspectives.

In these salons, community members responded to the movie clips in similar ways, but there were also important differences. For instance, in a salon held at a prominent regional theater, one white male wheelchair user recounted how he and other newly disabled people went on an outing from the rehabilitation hospital to see *Million Dollar Baby*. This story garnered a collective gasp of horror from the majority-disabled audience. But he countered our disdain by claiming that seeing this film made him recognize that he had a choice to make about living his life as a disabled person and that he had chosen to live. Although most of us failed to understand his perspective, we did come to recognize that our community is not homogeneous and that it would be important for our documentary to reflect disagreements as well as points of agreement. In another salon, an activist with intellectual disability amended our criticism of how the film *The Other Sister* (Gary Marshall, 1999) infantilizes intellectually disabled people by explaining that the film is a rare portrayal of people in her community as sexual beings. Over time, we learned that even some of the most egregiously offensive and traumatizing films had moments of value for certain members of our community. While we have threaded an argument about the reductive quality of disability representation throughout the documentary, we retain the contradictions and complexity of the salons we held during our research phase.

As a means of capturing the diversity of perspectives, our final roster of interviewees is a diverse one that ranges in age, impairment type, and background. We

are careful to include the voices of academics, artists, and activists. We maintain a conventional "talking head" format, but the interviewees' commentary cuts across genres and historical periods and through issues of race, sexuality, gender, and class. Interviewees place the images and narratives of disability in the context of both the sociopolitical and the personal. This approach starkly rejects Hollywood's tendency to isolate disabled people, turning single characters into representatives of all.[3] By putting these characterizations into sociopolitical context, we distance them from nostalgia or harmlessness. And we twist to our own ends Hollywood's tendency to use disabled characters to teach nondisabled people life lessons. Our interviewees not only school the audience on their own perspectives and experiences of these movies; they also include detail that speaks directly to other disabled people by using cultural references and insider language, which is often politically incorrect. Unlike Hollywood, then, we assume our "general audience" includes people with disabilities.

As we have shown rough cuts of the documentary to various communities, I am always fascinated by how audiences respond. Scenes that might be met by stunned silence from nondisabled, uninitiated audience members can invoke gales of laughter or nods of recognition in disability activist communities. In mixed audiences, different pockets of responses become perceptible and predictable. There may be a group of disabled audience members who snicker at all the insider jokes, making nondisabled audience members aware of their presence. Their laughter decenters assumptions of audience normalcy and homogeneity.

In Hollywood movies, audiences are often asked to identify with what I call the "nondisabled" guide. This guide appears as a character in the film—typically a nondisabled white, cisgender, heterosexual man—who keys audience members to the appropriate emotional responses to the disabled character. Think of Dr. Treves in *The Elephant Man* (David Lynch, 1980) or James in *Children of a Lesser God* (Randa Haines, 1986). In our documentary, we—the disabled filmmakers and interviewees—guide the audience to our perspectives ourselves. Without the nondisabled guide, some audience members can become disoriented. Oftentimes, nondisabled audience members express shock at how disabled people respond negatively to movies that they were led to believe were "positive" and inspiring representations. In various discussion sessions, some of these audience members double down on their fealty to iconic films like *The Miracle Worker* (Arthur Penn, 1962), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962), or *A Christmas Carol* (Edwin L. Marin, 1938), films that we argue use disabled characters only in service to teaching nondisabled audiences lessons about kindness, race relations, and generosity.

Other audience members have become angry when they learn that biopics about disabled characters are not really about their eponymous subjects. Instead, filmmakers pick and choose elements of the disabled subjects' lives that create touchstones for the nondisabled guides' emotional journeys. Take, for example, *The Soloist* (Joe Wright, 2009), a biopic of Nathanial Ayers, an African American homeless man who is befriended by the film's nondisabled guide—white-savior journalist Steve Lopez.

3 Martin Norden explains the isolation of disabled characters in *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

Lopez revitalizes his flagging career by publishing a series of articles on Ayers, who was once a promising cellist derailed by experiences of schizophrenia. Over the course of the film, Lopez learns lessons about mental illness, homelessness, and racism in a way that individualizes them into catalytic episodes that, by increments, transform Lopez into a better father, journalist, and all-around human being.[4]

Others feel frustrated with us for not liking any of these movies or offering explicit "fixes," which, to me, seems to confirm the expectation that the oppressed are responsible for fixing problems caused by oppressors. Although our creative team refuses to provide easy fixes to the problems Hollywood has created by endorsing any of their films, some of our interviewees point to films that they liked, that were important to their disability identity development, or that they just plain enjoy watching. In our interviews, Patsavas, Nussbaum, and I do discuss progressive, promising moments in the films we critique that might serve as foundations on which to create new, more complex representations.[5] We cannot bring ourselves, though, to "like" any of these films.

The filmmakers and our interviewees revel in collectively "cripping" these movies by pointing out their inherent ableism, witnessing the harm these films have inflicted on our psyches and everyday lives, and mocking them mercilessly.[6] Cripping movies is a viewing strategy that preserves our dignity in the face of films that dehumanize, stereotype, belittle, or demonize disabled lives. One of our favorite cripping strategies is the use of montages that pull together repeating disability tropes from the history of film: little people as magical creatures, nondisabled ladies tending to paralyzed men, blind men comically driving cars, blind women in bathtubs stalked by serial killers, blind people feeling sighted peoples' faces, disfigured villains plotting to destroy those responsible for their disablement, mercy killings, and disabled characters receiving standing ovations. These montages are overdetermined not only by impairment type (e.g., wheelchair users, facial difference, blindness, intellectual disability, mental illness) but also by their whiteness. In a sea of disability whiteness, a montage of black men with disabilities who teach white communities about racism appears as a stark contrast, a toxic intersection of ableism and racism prettied up as consciousness raising. Our *coup de théâtre* is a montage of nondisabled actors accepting Oscars for their virtuosic

4 For a discussion of how white male protagonists' encounters with racial and other marginalized Others in Hollywood films transforms them into more sensitive, benevolent patriarchs whose domination remains firmly intact, see Fred Pfiel, "The Year of Living Sensitively," in *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (London: Verso, 1995), 37–70.

5 In the course on disability and American film I teach at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I counter Hollywood's limiting disability tropes with examples coming from the international disability art and culture movement across artistic mediums. Our creative team decided to focus on Hollywood representation of disability for *Code of the Freaks*, leaving disability self-representation for, perhaps, our next movie!

6 See Carrie Sandahl, "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, nos. 1–2 (2003): 25–56, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9-1-2-25. In this article, I coined the use of "crip" as a verb to describe representational practices analogous to "queering." My initial definition is as follows: "Cripping spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects. Both queering and cripping expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity" (36). Since the time of this publication, many scholars have taken up the term, expanding and complicating it, most notably Robert McRuer in *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

performances as disabled characters. Each actor performs humility and gratitude in red-carpet finery and extraordinarily able-bodied perfection—a ritual of symbolic cure. The iterative force of these collected clips hyperbolizes, mocks, and exposes the parasitic relationship of the Hollywood's film industry to actual disabled people, from whose oppression the industry profits.

Not only does cripping the movies bring me joy; this representational retribution also builds community and makes my work in disability studies sustainable. The process of making this movie with my dearest friends and fierce activists blunts some of the pain of ableism. I began the process of cripping representation with my fellow disabled people in graduate school when I was training in theater practice and also was becoming an activist. The ableist exclusion and othering I experienced from the profession that I loved became a process of inclusion and centering in the disability community. I have been teaching a disability and film class for more than ten years and disability in representation for close to twenty, and it is exhausting and demoralizing to see the same type of media representations year after year. I am obligated to watch them. But I watch them armed with community and a glass of wine. The WPA's work on *Code of the Freaks* has included Twitter snarking our way through *Me before You* (Thea Sharrock, 2016), providing commentary on appalling euthanasia films, and laughing so hard that the wine snorts out my nose. Offend one of us, and you offend us all. The disability wet blanket strikes again! ✻

Room for (Materiality's) Maneuver: Reading the Oppositional in Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water*

by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder

In an important work of narrative theory regarding oppositional storytelling, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative*, Ross Chambers argues: "For deprivation of the power to speak is most usually not literal: if one excludes infants and animals, and those who are held incommunicado . . . what is usually meant by the phrase is exclusion from the powerful positions of 'preexisting,' socially derived authority."[1] The idea appears as commonsensical enough:

1 Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 14.

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removal of the power to speak usually occurs not in the material sense of being incapable of articulating with a voice but as closure from opportunities to seize narrative authority. Thus, this argument of socially imposed voicelessness enables Chambers to explain how narratives offer a platform for alternative voicings of marginalized experience that work to achieve "shifts in [the domain of] desire" in order to inaugurate alternative futures of investment in devalued lives.[2]

Our argument here moves alongside Chambers's argument regarding the provision of "narrative oppositionality" as an alternative space from which to speak experiences of social devaluation.[3] Yet we also intend to extend the parameters of narrative theory—and media studies—to include materially voiceless subjects that Chambers could envision only as exceptions to the rule organized around participants who are infant(ilized), animalized, or otherwise "held incommunicado." Further, our argument works alongside recent film studies analyses of the politics of the audio track, specifically the authority of voice-over to externalize the otherwise suppressed interiority of voiceless subjects.[4] Rather than "give voice" to voiceless subjects in a humanist mode that overvalues spoken communication as a most valued possession of embodiment, we argue that neo-materialist modes of storytelling offer other avenues for valuing the alternative capacities of nonnormative subjects, particularly human and nonhuman animals.

Bodies that might be enlisted among those that are materially "incommunicado" include the mute disabled protagonist Elisa (Sally Hawkins) and the warbling amphibian figure (Doug Jones) who populate the 2017 Academy Award–winning film by Guillermo del Toro, *The Shape of Water*. All of Chambers's categories of exceptional (i.e., literal) voicelessness are on display in this fantasy universe to materialize the deprivation of the power to speak for those occupying "peripheral embodiments."[5] Whereas voicelessness is often regarded as a metaphor for political powerlessness, we foreground actual communication disability as a way to explore a more phenomenological representational strategy at work in the film. In *The Shape of Water*, representations of speech communication prove innovative in their deployment of a neo-materialist approach to disability. Neo-materialism involves an encounter with the more "lively agential realism" of matter that counters the tendency to discount forms of embodiment as passive, inert surfaces awaiting ideological imprinting, as is often the case in social constructivist-based readings.[6] First, the protagonist, Elisa, is a woman who

2 Chambers, vii.

3 Chambers, 44.

4 For examples of film scholarship on the use of audio track, see, e.g., Pooja Rangan, "In Defense of Voicelessness: The Matter of the Voice and the Films of Leslie Thornton," *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 3 (2015): 95–126; Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); and Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

5 David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 6.

6 For explications of materiality's "lively agency" in neo-materialist theory, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Everyday Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), vii; Samantha Frost and Diane Coole, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3; and Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 139.

literally cannot vocalize her thoughts because her communication "disorder" (i.e., muteness) leads her to use sign language as an alternative pathway for expression. For example, in one scene the head of security at the OCCAM Aerospace Research Facility (her place of employment), Colonel Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon), sexually threatens Elisa in the infantilizing language of patriarchy: "You're not much to look at. When you say you're mute, are you silent entirely or do you squawk a little? I don't mind those scars or that you can't speak either. Kind of gets me going."[7] For Strickland, muteness represents an inferior characteristic of voicelessness that is also a sexual turn-on, as Elisa would not be able to articulate refusal; yet the first two forms of objectification also position her as a child, one he can easily control beneath the patronizing tutelage of government-based, paternalistic oversight. In this exchange Strickland references Elisa as desirably incommunicado, sexually exploitable, and thus deserving of her minimum-wage employment as one of the "shit cleaners" at OCCAM. What Chambers might analyze as the political silencing of femininity by heteronormative aggression surfaces in Elisa's experience of voicelessness, an inability to talk back to her antagonist—and indeed one could easily read the film's deployment of muteness as a metaphor for women's powerlessness under patriarchy.

Yet as film scholars such as Pooja Rangan argue, "The associations of verbal commentary with textual authority and liberation in contemporary feminist debates extend a metaphysical narrative that favors certain ideal, and therefore more human, voices over those voices encumbered by the matter of embodied difference."[8] Elisa's displacement from the category of the human is born at the material, rather than the strictly metaphorical, intersection of nonspeechified language in her inability to express opposition to Strickland's threat of rape. (Later she operationalizes an oppositional narrative by signing "fuck you" to the colonel as an uncomprehending speechified subject.) Del Toro sets out to make Elisa's muteness explicitly material in the sense that her inability to voice provides her with alternative tactics to pursue "the oppositional in narrative."

Another of Chambers's categories of exception to the plight of political speechlessness is that of the nonhuman animal. In addition to cabaret dancing and ventriloquized horses, *The Shape of Water* stages the "Amphibian Man" as "incommunicado" because the figure does not wield words but rather grunts and gargles sound to communicate. Throughout the film Elisa and the Amphibian figure use an elaborate series of codes and gestures to communicate, such as peeling eggs as foreplay or knocking on the aquarium's glass wall to signal arrival. As is often the case with on-screen representations of muteness and/or deafness, the film offers alternative multisensory experiences, such as smell, touch, and bodily movement. Further, the Amphibian figure's ambiguity of meaning is not only linguistic; it is also referenced by the presence of indeterminate sexual genitalia. At one point during a private conversation in their workplace hallway, Elisa signs to Zelda (Octavia Spencer) that her amphibious lover has a vaginal opening that unfolds to expose a penis-like erection. Thus, even Del Toro's concluding credit of the figure as an "Amphibian Man" is not technically accurate within the neo-materialist logic of the film

7 OCCAM here is not an acronym but a reference to the maxim of Occam's razor, which states that one should not make more assumptions than necessary.

8 Rangan, "In Defense."

that emphasizes complex crip and queer embodiments over metaphors of voicelessness.[9] Consequently, Elisa's surgical neck scars, the Amphibian figure's gills, and their parallel communication disabilities connect them as objects of fascination for an intrusive normative medico-militarized gaze.

Although not physically voiceless as in the case of Elisa, her queer next-door neighbor, Giles (Richard Jenkins), is a full participant in this alternatively communicative universe, as he is fully conversant in Elisa's sign language. His service as translator, supplying a speechified voice for Elisa, positions him as a gatekeeper figure into the world of disability. This gatekeeping function of translator for the inarticulate also leads him to posit "isolation" as the truth of the scaled, amphibian figure's unvoiced existence in ways that could be fully critiqued in Rangan's terms as the authoritative expressions of an anthropological voice-over narrator coming to the rescue by speaking for the voiceless. Elisa also voices the amphibian creature's desires with her own impositions of meaning, but her method involves an effort to establish a more direct form of communication by playing music and laying out hard-boiled eggs on the rim of his carceral pool to cultivate confidence in the potential of a more visceral exchange. Thus, the film goes in search of a way to buttress this chain of material marginalities with an alternative ethical investment in intersecting nonnormative lives. The storytelling methodology operates at the crossroads of lives marked primarily by communication disabilities in its search for modes of connection across contrasting systems of oppression. Their ability to foster a meaningful system of exchange proves contrapuntal to normative investments in the inherent value of communicatively normative able-bodied lives.

In making these alternative counterpoints through the film's representational exploration of material differences such as communication disability, queerness, and animality, *The Shape of Water* deploys these lives as materially excluded forms of existence that offer nonnormative alternatives to the violence of able-bodied heteronormativity. Giles's opening and concluding voice-overs of the mythic dimensions of this tale, Elisa's sudden fantasy breakout into vocal song in her black-and-white musical number, and the propensity of characters to project feelings of social isolation onto the Amphibian as a screen for their own experiences of marginalization, all suggest cracks in the film's commitment to the rules of its neo-materialist foundation. Each of these moments struggles with the primacy of voicing as the preferred route to interior truth for non-language-wielding others. This uneven vacillation in commitments to materiality cannot entirely avoid what Rangan critiques as the "belief that [ideal] humanity abides in the capacity for externalizing interiority through speech."[10]

However, to realize this boundary-crossing representational tactic—nonhuman and human animal crossings abound in the film—the film portrays efforts at exchange across species barriers of communication, anthropomorphism, and vocalization. The seductive alternative primarily involves recognizing little value in what Henri-Jacques

9 Robert McRuer explicates the conjoinment of crip-queer as a "stretchier" term that signifies "a range of other forms of embodiment or impairments at times not always adequately or easily comprehended by the signifier *disability*," in *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 19–20.

10 Rangan, "In Defense," 100.

Stiker theorizes as the homogenizing "desire for the same."[11] Following an interracial dance between Shirley Temple and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in a clip from *The Little Colonel* (David Butler, 1935), the backgrounded television screen in Giles's apartment offers up scenes involving a few talking horses:[12] a dancing horse interacting with a character named Betty in a cabaret, and an episode of *Mr. Ed* (Filmways Television, 1961) in which the protagonist, a talking horse, volunteers to head into outer space as an "astrohorse" after reading headlines about NASA's latest recruitment of sacrificial animals to pilot spaceships. The low cultural genres of comedy and cabaret offer up enough flexibility for Del Toro to find alternative vehicles for his fairy-tale retelling of alliances between alternatively communicative members of the species human and nonhuman.

If any one character serves as a cathexis point for audience identification over the course of the film, it might be Giles, as he has to undergo reluctant conversion to Elisa's alternative valuations of the amphibian figure. Giles serves as guide for Elisa beyond serving as one of her translators by showing her how to tap dance in place on the couch; he thus also imagines ways to interact through shared activities that do not require voiced communication. Yet when Elisa tries to guide him into an ethical response to the plight of the Amphibian, Giles responds in a completely cynical manner that further objectifies the creature's status as a lower life form on the scale of sentience: "Save every fish in the tank? So what he's alone—we're all alone. It's a freak, it's a thing." Giles refuses to assist in the cultivation of Elisa's boundary-crossing desire until his heteronormative mass-marketing illustrations for Jell-O are rejected by his advertising bosses as somehow not aesthetically appropriate to the corporate ethos. The suggestion here is that Giles's homosexual desire inappropriately seeps into the painting of the portrayal of the white, heterosexual, nuclear family he is attempting to design as a marketing lure.

Following this experience of exclusion from the marketing world of corporatized normative aesthetics, Giles begins to open up to Elisa's argument for an alternative value system of acceptance. In her most emphatic sign-language performance, Elisa offers Giles an argument that nonnormative identifications, such as their own, enable another pathway of identification to take shape: "I move my mouth like him, I make no sound like him, the way he looks at me he does not know what I lack or how I am incomplete. He sees me for what I am as I am." We need to pause here to sufficiently capture the nuances of what Elisa finds of herself in the amphibian figure, as it can easily be read as desire by erasure of disability or, at least, desire by fortunate misrecognition of her "incompleteness." In other words, one could misread Elisa's argument as desire for a damaged human by an animal who knows no better. However, the comment is more nuanced than this reading suggests, as Elisa argues not that she is incomplete or lacking in a way that the animal is not intelligent enough to realize but rather that his own inability to normatively voice his feelings mirrors an identification with

11 Henri-Jacques Stiker, *The History of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 53.

12 Karen Orr Vered critiques the Temple and Robinson dancing duo with respect to media racism for the ways Robinson was cut out of photos to cover over the racial threat he posed to white girlhood. See Vered, "White and Black in Black and White: Management of Race and Sexuality in the Coupling of Child-Star Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson," *Velvet Light Trap* 39 (Spring 1997): 52.

her own muteness. It is not that muteness goes unrecognized; rather, spoken language is not the basis of their investment in each other because "he sees me for what I am as I am." Thus, a dialogue between two social outsiders is achieved without vocalization and across the chasm that separates others from them as "voiceless" characters. Their investment in each other results from a material recognition that structures their alternative navigations in nonnormative communication systems.

The way in which *The Shape of Water* speaks otherwise in this drama of voicelessness offers an important expansion on Chambers's narrative theory of oppositionality. The geopolitical meaning of "deprivation of the power to speak" is depicted in Del Toro's film through the Amphibian's geographical association with the Amazon River, not to mention his positioning as an "illegal immigrant" of sorts, coercively brought to the United States and then tortured for the knowledge that might be gleaned from his nonnormative anatomy. Likewise, Elisa's African American colleague Zelda is a descendant of racialized subjects who were also, like the Amphibian figure, coercively removed from their homeland and enslaved to serve the desires of militarized, capitalist overlords. Like Giles, Zelda also balks at participating in Elisa's rescue scheme. Her risk as a woman of color involves sacrificing her government employment and personal well-being on behalf of the Amphibian figure's and Elisa's futurity. All the marginal existences in the film tend to be grouped into a general condition of social isolation, and thus their resistance to conditions of voicelessness threatens to override the particularity of their individual identity-based disenfranchisements. Yet the disparate identities on display in *The Shape of Water* recognize, as Jasbir K. Puar has argued, that "the stigmatization of bodily difference, racialized bodily difference, often understood as bodily defect, is already at the core of how populations come to be in the first place," and also that we must expand "the critical lexicon, vocabulary, and conceptual apparatuses of biopolitical inquiry on disability, especially for bodies and populations that may fall into neither disability nor ability, but challenge and upturn these distinctions altogether."[13]

By and large Del Toro holds to this principle, as each character is captured within various extermination schemes while seeking out modes of alternative pleasure that operate beneath the radar of prevailing sexual, racialized, gendered, and able-bodied modes of normalcy (e.g., Elisa's opening onanism, Giles's green Jell-O fetish, Zelda's intentional miscommunications of Elisa's sign language to her boss, the Amphibian figure's snatching of hard-boiled eggs laid out by Elisa), and thus these alternative material navigations of their conditions provide the film with its logic of alternative maps of desire.

Comparative literature scholar David Wills argues in *Prosthesis* that spoken language is an imperfect prosthesis through which humans grasp and give voice to the fleeting exteriority of the world.[14] Within such a logic, *The Shape of Water* might be said to find

13 Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), xx. Puar argues that the neoliberal rights-based identity politics of disability reifies visibility for some at the expense of many and that intersectional coalition politics need to be developed across lines of expendability (disability, class, race, those held in carceral sites such as Gaza) to "create new assemblages of accountability, conspiratorial lines of flight, and seams of affinity" (xxii).

14 David Wills, *Prosthesis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

an alternative home for its nonnormatively communicative characters in the room for maneuver offered by the oppositional exchange networks they create. Such alternative interactions offer counterdiscursive cripqueer ways of being to the corporatized artificial flavorings of a gelatinous heteronormativity. The title of the film suggests that desirability has no predetermined form as water's fluidity takes the shape of its container while also actively shifting the boundaries of that which attempts to bracket it. The scenes of Elisa's apartment underwater that open and end the film suggest that Del Toro's embrace of a material muteness is out of time in a fantasy world that José Muñoz might characterize as "a futurity that is not yet here."[15] Although inconsistently realized, such envisioning of human-nonhuman animal crossings marks what we might call an expansion of Chambers's original title: room for (materiality's) maneuver. *

15 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Utopia* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 12.

Mediating Syndromes of Postcommunism: Disability, Sex, Race, and Labor

by Kateřina Kolářová

> I am Peter, I am 19. . . . I'm almost 20. . . . I am Daněk. I am 14. . . . I am Radek. I am 17. . . . Michael[,] 14. . . . I am Honza. In this club they call me Miss Jackson, because I look like Michael Jackson. . . . Right now, I hustle. . . . I hustle too, like my friends. . . . I came here to find a job, but it did not work out so I began to hustle . . . it brings more money than work. . . . I am on the street.
>
> —*Not Angels but Angels*, Wiktor Grodecki, 1994[1]

These lines figure as an affectively charged introduction to Wiktor Grodecki's documentary *Not Angels but Angels* (*Andělé nejsou andělé*), which, together with its sequel *Body without Soul* (*Tělo bez duše*; Wiktor Grodecki, 1996), traces the development of sex work and the pornography industry in Prague, and Eastern Europe at large, in the mid-1990s. Partaking in what might be understood as "homosexual panic," Grodecki's documentaries center on the complex danger of the potentially infectious "homosexual" and on cross-border

1 *Body without Soul* follows an identical pattern in its introduction of young men.

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sexual transactions that circulate, spread, or "import" not only same-sex desire but also HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases, and the materialist culture of the West. The cultural archive created around the films (including film critiques and larger public debates) both reflects and generates anxieties attached to the national body, its borders and capacities, and as such offers an opportunity to think about disability intersectionally and capaciously as it is articulated through constructions of nationality and ethnic and racialized difference, as well as notions of sexual perversity, deprivation, and illness. I argue that this particular and particularly troublesome—as I elaborate further—archive forces us to reflect on the manifold dynamics of racialization in East-West contacts and on instances when the West was actually envisioned as the source of pathology and contamination symbolized by a broad array of "symptoms," including homosexuality, sex work, HIV/AIDS, drug addiction, seduction, and decadent consumerism. Because of the dense overlapping of meaning in these films, they offer a chance to rethink a disability analytic. In many ways, Grodecki's films map out some of the key moments in which the global dynamic of postsocialism calls for new "cripistemologies," new ways of knowing disability.[2]

In this short essay, I show how the author's and the audience's fascination with sex and cross-border sexual and viral transactions facilitated the divide between sexuality on the one hand and issues of work and labor on the other at a transitional moment in Czech history when other forms of labor across regional borders were, paradoxically, spotlighted. The films center on morality rather than labor and thus, I argue, inhibit materialist critiques of postsocialist developments in Eastern Europe. Bringing a crip critique to bear on these films, I argue that Grodecki's films call forth and make possible, as well as frustrate, alternative imaginaries of labor and disability.

In this polemical reading of the two documentaries by Grodecki, I contend that the focus on sexuality—and the moral scandal of sex work—puts pressure on visions of postsocialist rehabilitation and cure of the "East."[3] The portrayal of the young men who exchange their bodies for quick money is all the more outrageous and upsetting because it is shown to involve white, able-bodied, autonomous bodies of young men, the symbolic bearers of a future rehabilitated from what Václav Havel called "syndromes of post-communism":

> I believe and have strong hope that young people that grew up after the fall of communism are not affected by [the] horrible syndrome of post-communism. . . . With the fall of communism, also our for decades upheld structure of life-values fell down and took the life-style with it. It brought an end to time of securities, small, blunt and suicidal for the society as a whole, but securities. The time of freedom came instead. . . . The freedom brought a completely new set of demands for individual responsibility. Responsibility that many might have found unbearable. Many times I have compared this to the post-

2 For more on the concept of "cripistemologies" and its various explorations, see the special issue on the topic, edited by Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, nos. 2–3 (2014).

3 For more on the concept of postsocialist rehabilitation, see Kateřina Kolářová, "The Inarticulate Post-Socialist Crip: On the Cruel Optimism of Neoliberal Transformations in the Czech Republic," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 3 (2014): 257–274.

> incarceration psychosis when one, who for years used to live in a narrow corridor of detailed rules, find himself suddenly at a strange open space of freedom.[4]

Grodecki's films thus open space for a reappraisal and reimagination of disability (as well as Eastern Europe) because the portrayal of sex (work) destabilizes the dominant narratives of transition that picture Eastern Europe as (forever) overcoming the pathology of its socialist past.

Grodecki's films are clichéd, burdened by ethical problems, and generally not great films.[5] Focusing on virus-spreading foreign homosexuals and their lust for Eastern European boys, the films reinforce ethical imperatives of purity, propriety, and work that fuel neoliberal ideologies in the postsocialist region. And yet the timeliness of their (failed) attempt to articulate a critique of inequality in East-West transactions and encounters in the turbulent 1990s is striking. As we attempt to understand the ways in which embodiment, sexuality, and desire have been mediated in the neoliberal era, it is important to consider the complex role that postsocialist societies played—or were made to play—in global economic, social, and sexual restructurings. For that reason, there is something to be gained from a queer and crip analysis of seemingly marginal, nearly forgotten, and compromised media texts such as Grodecki's. If read against the grain, the films offer a salient reflection on how ideologies of liberalism and liberal morality diverted attention away from what Anca Parvulescu calls "the traffic in Eastern European bodies" and on how such "traffic" depended on race, sexuality, and disability.[6]

Not Angels but Angels and *Body without Soul* provoked affectively charged responses in the Czech society. The public reception of Grodecki's films linked the often-underage male sex workers represented in the films to disenchantment with the post-1989 transformation. A national poll in 1997 revealed that more than half of the Czech population were disillusioned with postrevolutionary developments and felt that "post-November dreams" were not being fulfilled.[7] Financial scandals during the mid-1990s put an abrupt end both to promises of equally distributed prosperity and to citizens' trust in a functioning democracy. Against the backdrop of disillusionment with postsocialist transitions, Grodecki turned the stories of young men engaging in sex work into a narrative about excessive consumerism and the corrupting impact of foreign influences. Cross-border sex work and the overconsumption of Coca-Cola, Western goods, drugs, and bodies became synecdoches for a

4 Václav Havel, address to both Chambers of the Parliament, December 9, 1997, http://www.vaclavhavel-library.org/cs/vaclav-havel/dilo/projevy#yr1997. Author's translation.

5 There are many aspects of the films that are ethically dubious. Perhaps most important, the films have outed the young men as "prostitutes" and thus violated their consent given under the condition that the films only be shown abroad. Furthermore, the director's gaze in many ways duplicates the objectification it critiques.

6 Anca Parvulescu, *The Traffic in Women's Work: East European Migration and the Making of Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

7 November 17, 1989, is recorded as the start of the Velvet Revolution, which marks the end of state socialism in Czechoslovakia; for the national poll, see Ivan Lamper, "Minulý týden," *Respekt* 8, no. 9 (1997): 52.

collapsing moral order wherein the body of the nation would eventually be consumed by deadly drugs and AIDS.

Positioning himself as a Polish émigré returning to Eastern Europe after a long exile in Los Angeles, Grodecki offers a comment on "[the] problem of Eastern Europe" and the degrading force "the market [has on the] human soul" in one of the interviews he gave on *Body without Soul*:

> Corruption of the soul . . . is caused by the rapid transformation of the society toward materialism; this corruption is under way in the Czech Republic and elsewhere in the Eastern European states and is proceeding quickly. We are losing the measure of the extent to which we are willing to sell ourselves and turn ourselves into a commodity. . . . [O]ne of the aims of the film is to reveal what price we are paying and we will continue to pay for the onset of consumerism. . . . Consumerism develops like a cancer. When a young boy comes to Prague and ends in the porn film industry, he becomes a commodity both to himself and to others. "Move, here is your money."[8]

Grodecki construes Eastern Europe as alienated and objectified through the forceful entry of unregulated markets that turn Eastern Europeans themselves into "commodities," into objects, tools for someone else's gratification.[9] Ironically, Grodecki echoes Marx's discussion of alienated labor and reification at a moment when even the Department of History at Charles University (where I studied in the mid-1990s) purged itself of excess copies of Marx's *Capital* and other key works of historical materialism.

If Grodecki restates Marx's critique, he also re-creates its limits. Despite the fact that Grodecki blames the (globalized) market for the rising consumerism in Czech society, he ultimately falls back onto liberal ideologies of humanism, as does the public reception of the documentaries. As Roderick A. Ferguson reminds us, Marx's own outrage at "prostitution" as the utmost "defilement of man" was predicated on the scandal of monetized transactions in sexual pleasure and, importantly, on construing the figure of the prostitute as a "racial menace" and a threat to middle-class values of propriety.[10] In posing the "corruption of the soul" as the most threatening of the "syndromes of postcommunism," Grodecki forecloses any discussion of sex work as work.[11] Through the racialized logic of a moral panic rooted in liberalism, Grodecki shifts attention away from the growing precarities initiated by the free market economy and cultural imperialism to stories of sexual depravity, illness, disability, and racialized cross-border differences that threaten the national future.

The heart of the scandal of sex work, Leticia Sabsay notes, lies in the fact that sex work collapses the distance between the worker and the work.[12] I further contend

8 Wiktor Grodecki, "Chtěl jsem ukázat duši člověka," *Reflex* 7, no. 46 (1996): 46–47. Author's translation.

9 Grodecki, "Chtěl."

10 Qtd. in Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 7.

11 Grodecki, "Chtěl."

12 Leticia Sabsay, "The Ruse of Sexual Freedom: Neoliberalism, Self-Ownership and Commercial Sex," in *Global Justice and Desire: Queering Economy*, ed. Nikita Dhawan, Antke Engel, Christoph H. E. Holzhey, and Volker Woltersdorff (London: Routledge, 2015), 180–194.

that sex work threatens to reveal that sovereign subjectivity is predicated on compulsory able-bodiedness—or as Robert McRuer famously argues, the phantasm of one's freedom and sovereignty depends on one's ability and capacity to work.[13] Sabsay argues that "under capitalist conditions, bodies become the only means of production that workers have *as sovereign owners of their bodies*"; consequently, detaching bodies from labor allows for a "modern objectification of the body" at the same time that it constitutes the fantasy of "self-owned subject," a powerful fantasy carrying specific significance for societies "recovering" from the experience of an authoritarian regime.[14]

These observations, as intuitive as they may feel, nevertheless partake of the epistemology of exposure that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick deems "paranoid reading."[15] As an alternative, she advocates "reparative reading," a hermeneutics of love for the text. Imagining a crip version of reparative reading, I want to point briefly to moments in which the documentaries resist the disconnection of sex and work, oppose the imperative of delayed gratification that frame what I call postsocialist rehabilitation, and gesture toward limits in disability epistemologies more associated with the United States and Western Europe. To do this, while continuing to acknowledge the exploitative transnational economy of labor, I return to the multiplicity of voices of the young men recorded in the documentaries as they articulate their various motivations for sex work and their different levels of precariousness. Some of them are shy, some more matter-of-fact, and some fabulously and flamboyantly queer. Some do present their involvement in sex work as a result of being thrown out of their homes and families, yet others proudly present themselves as *Homo economicus*, measuring the price of their labor against the value of their leisure.[16] One of the men observes, for instance, "I would not have even gotten out of bed for less than [three thousand Czech crowns, then a solid amount of cash, charged for sexual favors]." The young men's testimonies offer a thick constellation of queer-crip excess, and the cutting together of multiple interviews encourages or compels an apprehension of this excess, with hopeful gestures to the future. The diverse testimonies of the young men disidentify themselves and by extension the viewer from the domineering morality of cleansing the socialist past through asceticism, hard work, and pious subjection to the law of neoliberal economics. Simultaneously, the young men themselves disidentify from, and mark the limits of, disability epistemologies framed through discourses of identity and rights. The multiple forms of cripness represented in Grodecki's documentaries—namely addiction, HIV seropositivity, trauma from sexual violence and exploitation, and stress and anxiety linked to precariousness—put the category of "disability" under pressure.

13 On compulsory able-bodiedness, see Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

14 Sabsay, "Ruse," 190, emphasis in original.

15 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–40.

16 For the concept of *Homo economicus*, see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Michel Senellart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

These stories illustrate how cripness, materializing through the transnational traffic in bodies, remains unperceived and inarticulable in epistemologies based on liberal forms of progress and recognition. These liberal epistemologies are geared toward phantasms of the independent and recognized "citizen" of the postsocialist state. Despite how compromised Grodecki's documentaries are, they do mediate, and give cinematic form to, alternative "cripistemologies" that force us to rethink what disability looks like, resist compulsory rehabilitation, and think outside of or beyond recognizable concepts of identity. In the process, the films accentuate how disability is always both entangled in symbolic racializations and serving dynamic constructions of the East-West dichotomies.

Without denying the heavy layers of homophobic and racialized conservative moralism that characterize most reactions to Grodecki's documentaries, this reparative reading realigns sex and work to emphasize the continuum of various forms of labor and the "traffic in Eastern European bodies" upon which the transnational, postsocialist global economy relies. If read along these lines, the portraits of an "imperialist economics of boys" in *Not Angels but Angels* and *Body without Soul* represent historical traces of other devalued Eastern European bodies caught up in the institutions of transnational capitalism.[17] My reading, however, accentuates a paradox by gesturing to the ways that the stories of these enterprising young men engaging in sex work are not currently understood as related to other stories of Eastern European women and men traveling abroad as scholars, workers, carers, or domestic help. Despite the fact that sex work was one of the first forms of "traffic" and devalued labor, it is not currently recognized as part of the extraction of cheap labor from Eastern Europe. We might thus ask, How do the stories in Grodecki's documentaries relate to other stories of traffic in Eastern European bodies, including those of workers who come to the Czech Republic from other postsocialist countries and contexts?

The last question brings me to another knot in the films, the complicated ways in which postsocialism, race, and disability overlap and intersect. Grodecki's films link growing nationalism and xenophobia in Eastern Europe with the traffic in Eastern European bodies as well as invisible and unspeakable entanglements in the legacies of colonialism. In so doing, they offer an alternative, even reparative, interpretation of the "problem of Eastern Europe."[18] Grodecki's films foster moral outrage at foreigners corrupting, using, and infecting Czech able-bodied men, which reflects a Czech self-understanding as always colonized.[19] This outrage feeds existing moral panics over sexual, cultural, and religious difference. Yet such narratives about corrupting foreigners monetizing sex and endangering the national body are always necessarily embedded in paradox. As many scholars have pointed out, the fantasy of the sovereign, propertied subject itself carries the legacy of colonialism and imperial logics, where

17 Matti Bunzl, "The Prague Experience: Gay Male Sex Tourism and the Neocolonial Invention of an Embodied Border," in *Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Daphne Berdahl, Matti Bunzl, and Martha Lampland (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 70–96.

18 Grodecki, "Chtěl."

19 This attitude is not only Czech; it is shared by many Eastern Europeans. See Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, "Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 1 (2009): 6–34.

the visions of self-ownership are built on seeing the other as property and as lacking a capacity for autonomy.[20] In other words, critiques of overpowering and exploitative encounters with the West are built on a concept of the self firmly rooted in imperial praxis and ideology, including and especially imperial expansions.

One of the most fascinating features of the films, as I have suggested, is their capacity to point viewers toward the importance of recognizing alternative disability genealogies and exploring disability in cultural locations that are seemingly "not about disability." Addiction, trauma, HIV/AIDS, anxiety, and other embodied crip experiences belie neoliberal narratives of progress that are often attached to more recognizable forms of disability identity. Sitting with Grodecki's films is not pleasurable or easy. However, their contradictions, tensions, and failures not only embody a testimony to the historical moment of transition in the 1990s but also speak to social conflicts pertinent to Eastern Europe and to transnational encounters more generally. *

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20 For instance, Sabsay, "Ruse."

The Many in the One: Depression and Multiple Subjectivities in *Inside Out*

by Nicole Markotić

It seems ironic to me that the only English-language film I am aware of since Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999) to address multiple subjectivities is a children's film, Pete Docter's *Inside Out* (2015), a film that troubles the usual way audiences think of the many and the one when it comes to the psyche.[1] *Being John Malkovich* projects one interpretation of multiple subjectivities that occur between the many and the one inside its title character. In Jonze's film, multiple subjectivities mostly play out on a psychical landscape of contested gender and psychotherapy caricature. The film contests commonsensical

1 There are many terms for the many and the one, drawn from different discourses, among them those from psychology, philosophy, and literature. I use these terms somewhat interchangeably, as my plan here is not to provide a taxonomy but to approach the ratios of relationship between the many and the one by way of a neutral term, "multiple subjectivities."

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ideas about oneness as represented via characterial independence, self-awareness, and autonomy; in effect, the film frequently conflates the imaginary and the real through the corporal manifestation of the celebrity John Malkovich. But unlike conventional representations of oneness, comparable representations of multiple subjectivities are often unsettling. Tellingly, few films have followed the psychological trajectory of Jonze's hit by presenting the self, the one, as potentially "multiple."[2]

Besides *Being John Malkovich*, there are only a few other examples of English-language media presenting multiple subjectivities, notably the TV show *Herman's Head* (Fox, 1991–1994) and *Inside Out*. Whereas *Herman's Head* emphasizes conventional gender functions and *Being John Malkovich* challenges independence and self-awareness, *Inside Out* suggests a new and underexplored relationship between the many and the one, as the film proposes that every person is made up of composite personalities and that these composites "run the show" in ways that the human "vessel" they inhabit is not only unaware of but also prove necessary for emotional and psychological balance. This children's film is also about depression, and in this brief essay I contend that this multivalent approach to mental disability offers cinema and media studies a strategy to separate depression from sadness, demonstrating how one might alleviate the former through a recognition and acceptance of the latter.[3] In addition to depicting a distinction between depression and sadness, *Inside Out* suggests to viewers that such a distinction matters, that acknowledging emotions will not trigger a mental or emotional disability; rather, sanctioning upsetting emotions offers individuals strategies to avoid suppressing crucial feelings.

2 A wide chasm exists between films and television shows that convey multiple subjectivities and those that portray some rendering of dissociative identity disorder (formerly referred to as multiple-personality disorder). The latter is often found in horror and comedy media. To list but a handful: *6 Souls* (Måns Mårlind and Björn Stein, 2013), *Angel* (Joss Whedon, 1999–2004), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Otis Turner, 1908; John S. Robertson, 1920; Rouben Mamoulian, 1931; Victor Fleming, 1941), *Frankie & Alice* (Geoffrey Sax, 2010), *Heroes* (Tom Kring, 2006–2010), *Me, Myself, and Irene* (Bobby Farrelly and Peter Farrelly, 2000), *My Own Worst Enemy* (Jason Smilovic, 2008), *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Split* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2016), *Sybil* (Daniel Petrie, 1976; Joseph Sargent, 2007), *The Three Faces of Eve* (Nunnally Johnson, 1957), and *United States of Tara* (Diablo Cody, 2009–2011). Most of these portray characters with dissociative identity disorder as pathologically dangerous and even murderous. There are major differences between such representations of dissociative identity disorder and narrative depictions of characters who interrogate individuality by performing the self as potentially multiple. I am interested here in the projection of polyphonous conceptions of selfhood that readers encounter in experimental poets, such as Bruce Andrews (who invokes multiple speaking voices that challenge the idea of a coherent persona), Rachel Blau DuPlessis (whose poem *Drafts* exceeds the limits of a single book), Robert Kroetsch (who proposes a poetic manuscript-in-process in *The Hornbooks of Rita K*), and Sachiko Murakami (who invites other poets to contribute first lines in *Get Me Out of Here*). As well, the term "multiple subjectivities" extends to include the bifurcated protagonist of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*, the divided self of Gertrude Stein's *Ida: A Novel*, Judith Butler's arguments about gender performativity, and even trans people who prefer the pronoun "they" over a single-gendered designation. These poetic, fictional, and activist stances defy a unified, fixed identity and give a context for my reading of *Inside Out* as an opportunity to examine multiplicity.

3 An often elastic term because it straddles medical, psychological, and cultural fields, for the purposes of this essay my working definition of "depression" stems from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* categorization of "major depressive disorder"; namely, the term applies to individuals who lose interest in activities they once enjoyed and experience persistent feelings of dejection and hopelessness. Describing individuals who experience such symptoms, the DSM lists several criteria, including a persistent "depressed mood," "marked diminished interest or pleasure in" most activities, "fatigue or loss of energy," and "feelings of worthlessness." And "in distinguishing grief from a major depressive episode," the latter forms the "inability to anticipate happiness or pleasure." *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 160–161.

It is unusual for a children's film to portray mental illness, but *Inside Out* has garnered much acclaim: *Variety*, for instance, praised it for its "stunningly original concept that will not only delight and entertain the company's massive worldwide audience, but also promises to forever change the way people think about the way people think."[4] Reviewers were quick to question the feasibility of having a children's film protagonist managed by five distinct emotions. Although many reviewers—Barnes, Debruge, Scott[5]—defend the choice to portray emotional misery to young viewers, few focus on the idea of a mind "divided" by multiple subjectivities. In this computer-animated film, eleven-year-old Riley becomes unhappy when her family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco; her profound sadness is soon taken over by depression. In many ways, Riley comes across as a "typical" Midwestern hockey-loving girl, but she is also depicted as a character made up of five autonomous personalities—Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust—sometimes working cooperatively and sometimes in conflict with each other (Figure 1).

The film focuses on Joy (Amy Poehler) as its central character rather than on its human protagonist, Riley. Indeed, Jonas Rivera, the film's producer, says about Riley, "She's not the main character, she's the setting."[6] Interestingly, those allegories of human emotions in medieval times (which included passion and chivalry, among others) might be considered an early literary instance of multiple subjectivities. As A. O. Scott notes in the *New York Times*, "There is an old literary tradition of turning what used to be called the Passions into characters, and *Inside Out* updates this tradition with brilliant casting."[7] All the five anthropomorphized emotions guide Riley in vastly different directions when they take charge of the neurological command center inside Riley's brain. Riley's growing unhappiness with her family's new city and situation, and the loss of her earlier home and routines, cause her to experience a pain that Joy—who usually controls the Head Quarters—becomes desperate to "manage" and expunge. After a series of disappointing events—the moving company misplaces their belongings, the local pizzeria serves pizza with broccoli, Riley plays badly in her hockey tryouts, and her best friend makes a new friend quickly—Joy attempts to isolate Sadness (Phyllis Smith). Joy blames Sadness, who comes across as habitually lethargic and lacking in confidence, for Riley's inability to fully adjust to her new circumstances. Each independent and somewhat autonomous emotion has its role; Joy allows that Fear, Disgust, and even Anger have roles to play in Riley's well-being and safety, but early in the film Joy confesses that she's "not actually sure what [Sadness] does." Joy, who clearly resents Sadness's presence, comes to learn that Sadness is vital to Riley's

4 Peter Debruge, "Cannes Film Review: 'Inside Out,'" *Variety*, May 18, 2015, https://variety.com/2015/film/festivals/inside-out-review-disney-pixar-cannes-1201499227.

5 Brooks Barnes, "'Inside Out,' Pixar's New Movie from Pete Docter, Goes inside the Mind," *New York Times*, May 20, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/movies/inside-out-pixars-new-movie-from-pete-docter-goes-inside-the-mind.html; Debruge, "Cannes Film Review"; A. O. Scott, "Pixar's 'Inside Out' Finds the Joy in Sadness, and Vice Versa," *New York Times*, June 18, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/movies/review-pixars-inside-out-finds-the-joy-in-sadness-and-vice-versa.html.

6 Jonas Rivera, "Pete Docter and Jonas Rivera on Making Joy Likeable," interview by Perri Nemiroff, *Collider*, April 8, 2015, http://collider.com/inside-out-pete-docter-jonas-rivera-interview.

7 Scott, "Pixar's 'Inside Out.'"



Figure 1. Joy at the control center in *Inside Out* (Pixar, 2015).

emotional well-being, because she most strongly facilitates Riley's connections with others. If you cut out sadness and joy, then only fear, disgust, and anger remain. Sadness not only provides an outlet to express unsetting feelings, but sadness is the way to connect with other people, to connect with others about less-than-perfect moments. Whereas popular narratives often depict depression as "developing" as a result of sadness, this film suggestively depicts depression as taking root because Riley lacks access to expressing her sadness. The imposition of joviality, or at least its appearance, causes Riley to spiral deeper into misery. By the end of the film, when Riley eventually finds and embraces her sadness (and when Joy embraces the character Sadness), the child becomes better equipped to shoulder not only difficult emotional moments but also her own multiplicity.

In her (frequent) attempts to sequester Sadness, Joy inadvertently sends the two of them through the tubes that relay Riley's memories, ultimately delivering Joy and Sadness to the edges of Long-Term Memory, a geographical representation of the mental and emotional outback, thus placing them in bygone times rather than extant in Riley's daily life. When Joy and Sadness leave Riley's Head Quarters, Riley proceeds through her days predominantly driven by Anger (Lewis Black) and, to a lesser extent, Fear (Bill Hader) and Disgust (Mindy Kaling), which leads to her not being able to access either Sadness or Joy, suggesting that her inability to feel more than anger or dread develops into depression. Director Pete Docter remarks that, for many people, "childhood is kind of a sacred, special kind of point in time that has a real joy and purity to it. And we sort of long on a daily basis to reach back and kind of grab onto that in some way."[8] The film subverts that nostalgia in part by depicting a characteristically "happy" child undergoing melancholy and even despair. Joy may sequester Sadness throughout the film, but Sadness still manages to "touch" Riley's memories and nuance her emotions as not starkly happy or miserable. But once Sadness and Joy leave Head Quarters altogether, Riley is unable to process the unhappiness she feels

8 Pete Docter, "It's All in Your Head: Director Pete Docter Gets Emotional in *Inside Out*," interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, June 10, 2015, https://www.npr.org/2015/06/10/413273007/its-all-in-your-head-director-pete-docter-gets-emotional-in-inside-out.

at moving, starting in a new school, and missing her friends and teammates. Eventually, Joy comes to realize that Sadness is crucial to social relationships. During their expulsion from Head Quarters, Joy and Sadness encounter Bing Bong (Richard Kind), Riley's childhood imaginary friend. Bing Bong experiences despondency at being forgotten, and Joy attempts to cheer him up. But Sadness treats his emotions as valid, allowing him to grieve. In the process, Sadness helps Joy to understand that growing up sometimes means experiencing loss and feeling sorrow about such loss. *Inside Out* presents sadness as a way to navigate depression and multiple subjectivities as a way to explore mental and emotional diversity. *Inside Out* thereby provides a marked contrast to feel-good movies that serve as cultural pedagogy. In the first moments of the film, Joy emerges as an integral and yet separate entity from Riley. My contention is that one's multiplicity unfolds even as societal delineations fabricate the self as discrete and innate.

The "inside voices" in Riley's head may not disturb audiences, because the emotions come across as Riley's team of protectors rather than as Riley in various emotional forms. Each one appears different in face and body, each embodies a distinctive, vibrant color and is played by a well-known actor, and the five are presented in two different genders, male and female. In an interview, Docter expresses the view that these emotions actually represent parental figures, confounded by the changes their near-adolescent child undergoes. He says that although "Joy is *part* of Riley, she herself is *not* Riley."[9] His sense of the emotion-characters as fulfilling parental roles corroborates Joy's attempts to "protect" Riley from what she sees as negative feelings.

Although the film skates along a continuum in which sadness is vital to one's well-being but depression is its opposite, the resolution clearly lets viewers know that embracing sadness matters. In his *New York Times* review, Scott says that "*Inside Out* turns a critical eye on the way the duty to be cheerful is imposed on children, by well-intentioned adults and by the psychological mechanisms those grown-up authorities help to install."[10] In two separate scenes, Riley's parents come to her bed and appeal to her exultant self. In the first scene, and before she loses Joy and Sadness, Riley's mother comes to tell her their belongings have not yet been located. "In all the confusion," she says, "you've stayed our happy girl." And in the second scene, her father enters her room and asks, "Come on, where's my happy girl?" As one reviewer notes, Riley's subsequent forced smile "is quietly heartbreaking."[11] That demanded cheerfulness feeds Riley's alienation and depression. Taking a rhetorical approach to mental disabilities, and citing Andrea Nicki, who talks about "a culture of insistence on cheerfulness,"[12]

9 Pete Docter, "Finding the Joy in Sadness with *Inside Out* director Pete Docter," interview by Rachel Heine, *Nerdist*, June 17, 2015, https://nerdist.com/finding-the-joy-in-sadness-with-inside-out-director-pete-docter.

10 Scott, "Pixar's 'Inside Out.'"

11 Scott.

12 Andrea Nicki, "The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma," *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 94. Further, J. Halberstam writes about the advantages of failure, arguing that, "while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life." In *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 3. Halberstam later argues in regard to children's films that "animation allows the viewer to enter into other worlds and other formulations of this world. . . . [Animated cinema] is also the image of change and transformation itself," 181.

Margaret Price critiques the insidiousness of such a demand to be cheerful for a person with depression because to fulfill "this [demand] would involve not just an attitude *toward* his illness but a direct erasure *of* his illness."[13]

A short but telling dinner scene occurs about midway into the film, when viewers get a brief glimpse of inner Head Quarters other than Riley's. In the scene, Riley grumpily picks at her food while Disgust, Fear, and Anger attempt to "just do what Joy would do." While their despondent daughter sulks at the dinner table, her parents aim to cajole her out of her bad mood in different ways. Her mother cheerfully mentions a new hockey team Riley can try out for, and her father first asks her an absentminded question about school (while reviewing hockey plays in his mind) and then leaps to anger. For the first and only time in the film (excepting a few end scenes), a Head Quarters similar to Riley's is represented as the interior in each of her parents' minds. Inside her mother's mind, Sadness sits behind the main controls—intimating that Riley's mother also struggles with melancholy—with the other four participating to lesser but approximately equivalent degrees. Inside her father's mind, Anger is at the helm, only Anger and Fear speak, and the setup resembles a military hierarchy. Inside both, Joy's role is negligible.

Inside each parent, the emotions appear consistently gender coded, although the mother's Anger has a deep voice and wears pants and a tie, and the version of Joy inside the father's mind has Joy's same pixie haircut and wears a shapely white shirt. Throughout *Inside Out*, in contrast, Riley has both female-defined and male-defined characters living in her Head Quarters: Joy, Sadness, and Disgust come across as female, and Anger and Fear appear to be male. Such depictions both challenge gender norms and reassert them. On the one hand, each personified emotion plays to conventional ideas of feminine and masculine traits; on the other hand, presenting Riley as encompassing more than one gender position at once disrupts received hegemonic gender dynamics. One could also argue that this dinner scene depicts the progression of the social construction of gender in a world that renounces difference. Although a small moment in the narrative, the dinner scene functions to reinscribe normative gender roles; it also insightfully nuances how such gender performativity imprints upon one's conscious and unconscious desires. The scene is fascinating in presenting thirteen characters who speak or interact with one another at various levels in dialogue that lasts just under three and a half minutes. Repeat viewers may notice details that slip by too quickly upon first viewing: for example, Riley's five emotions project distinct physical, emotional, and psychological characteristics, whereas the father's and mother's emotions convey a much more gender-homogeneous appearance. Such a uniform depiction of selfhood suggests not only that one grows into societal conformity but also that the process of stabilizing identity tends to conflate the multiple aspects of a character's subjectivity into one, emotionally flat, homogeneous personality.

Inside Out is one of a handful of films that propose that characters have—and display—multiple subjectivities. That Riley is frustrated and depressed acknowledges her emotional disability; that her brain is peopled by five distinct and gender-differentiated

13 Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 13.

personalities advocates for gender diversity within a cognitive schema of multiple subjectivities. Although *Inside Out* does not venture into the radical, gender-risky territory of *Being John Malkovich*, the animated film's driving objective is to portray a child experiencing sorrow and loss. For a long time, the original plot of *Inside Out* focused on Joy and Fear getting lost together, because, director Docter says, "It seemed like the funniest choice."[14] But, he says, he couldn't write an ending that worked and feared getting fired. He went for a walk and thought about what he would miss most. It wasn't the project itself, but friends he'd made working at Pixar. "At that moment, I realized that Sadness was the key," Docter says. "We were trying to push her to the side. But she needed to be the one going on the journey. Joy needed to understand that it's O.K. for Sadness to be included at the controls."[15] Joy is nearly defeated by Riley experiencing misery to the degree she does, but ultimately Joy—and the film's viewers—comes to realize that Sadness does have a unique purpose. In this manner, a film directed toward a young audience suggests that personalities can be multiple and concurrent, explores the intricate moods of a prepubescent girl, and also appreciates that sadness is necessary and distinct from, perhaps even a salve for, depression. ✻

14 Barnes, "'Inside Out.'"

15 Barnes.

Contributors

Elizabeth Ellcessor is an assistant professor in media studies at the University of Virginia. She is the author of *Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation* (New York University Press, 2016) and coeditor, with Bill Kirkpatrick, of *Disability Media Studies* (New York University Press, 2017).

Bill Kirkpatrick is an associate professor of media studies in the Department of Communication at Denison University. He is coeditor (with Elizabeth Ellcessor) of *Disability Media Studies* (New York University Press, 2017) and is completing a book on health and disability and early US radio.

Kateřina Kolářová is an assistant professor of cultural studies in the Department of Gender Studies, Charles University, Prague. Her work has appeared in *Feminist Review*, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, *Iterationen: Geschlecht im kulturellen Gedächtnis*, and *Somatechnics.* Currently, she is working on a book project titled *Postsocialist Rehabilitative Citizenship: Disability, Race, Sexuality and the Limits of National Belonging*.

Nicole Markotić is author of four poetry books, three novels (including the recent young-adult *Rough Patch*), and a collection of essays, *Disability in Film and Literature*. She has worked as poetry editor for Red Deer Press and as fiction editor for NeWest Press. She is currently working on a book on disability in children's literature and is a

professor at the University of Windsor, where she teaches creative writing, disability studies, and children's literature.

Robert McRuer is a professor of English in the Department of English at George Washington University. He is the author of *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* (New York University Press, 2018) and *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York University Press, 2006). With Anna Mollow, he edited *Sex and Disability* (Duke University Press, 2012).

David T. Mitchell and **Sharon L. Snyder**'s work primarily focuses on representations of disability in literary and filmic texts. Their most recent book, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment* (University of Michigan Press, 2015), considers how contemporary practices of social inclusion for people with disabilities have proved anemic to more significant engagement with nonnormative embodiment as a map to an alternative ethics of living outside of normalcy. Mitchell's book project, tentatively titled *The Geopolitics of Disability*, theorizes the fraught relationship between experiences of disability and the "precarity" born of processes of globalization.

Carrie Sandahl is an associate professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago in the Department of Disability and Human Development. She directs Chicago's Bodies of Work, an organization that supports the development of disability arts and culture. Her research and creative activity focus on disability identity in live performance and film.