Locating Disability

Cultural Locations of Disability. Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 245 pp.

Reviewed by Jay Dolmage, West Virginia University

<1> Cultural locations of disability are the spaces in which people with disabilities have been placed, studied and diagnosed, their roles proscribed, their lives devalued or foreshortened; they are also the places people with disabilities have reclaimed and from which disability has been redefined. This book maps the former to create the latter. Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell offer a sweeping history of Western oppression and exclusion of people with disabilities, and in so doing help to reshape the role of disability along new activist and academic vectors.

<2> Disability studies theorist Brendan Gleeson has written that "disabled people in Western societies have been oppressed by the production of space, due in part to their exclusion from the discourses and practices that shape the physical layout of societies."(1) Tanya Titchkosky and Rod Michalko have argued that people with disabilities are often seen as "draw[ing] out the intentions of an environment" via the "limits it inscribes [on] their lives and bodies."(2) To theorize space and location from the perspective of disability studies, then, is to recognize the ways that geographies have excluded and negatively constructed the disabled body. In *Cultural Locations of Disability*, Mitchell and Snyder set out to examine locations "in which disabled people find themselves deposited, often against their will" (3). These locations are revealed to be "sites of violence, restriction, confinement, and absence of liberty" (x). In exposing these sites, and analyzing their legacy, the authors recognize a grisly history and question pervasive exclusions and limits, as they place discourse about disability into the hands of people with disabilities.

<3> The authors add their voice to the work of such literary critics and cultural historians as James Trent, Siobhan Somerville, Robyn Wiegman, and Nancy Ordover, and the disability studies scholars Shelley Tremain, Robert McRuer, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Lennard Davis, writing an important new chapter in the literature on Western bodily attitudes. Snyder and Mitchell's book brings together the lenses and methodologies of disability studies and cultural geography to evaluate the spaces and places of ability and disability in Europe and North America through the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By suggesting that disability has been constrained by space, and mapping the impact this has had on people's lives, Snyder and

Mitchell also bring an activist energy to this work. In re-evaluating the historical locations of disability, they work against a common belief, still strongly held: that disability does not deserve a place in society, that disability should be eradicated or hidden. In this way, their project is never exclusively historical; they always speak against prejudices that remain rooted in the mainstream. They acknowledge that without "politicized efforts to reclaim disability as something more than tragedy, dysfunction, and misfortune, we would not be able to fully understand the entrapment" of the cultural locations under examination (4). Further, without this critical understanding of the history of disability, we would be left with an impoverished understanding of any cultural locations or products.

<4> This politicized message can be drawn back across the last 150 years of Western history, yet Mitchell and Snyder show that, largely, attitudes about disability have remained unchanged. The "limits" inscribed on the lives and bodies of people with disabilities, mentioned above by Titchkosky and Michalko, are often seen as "natural." Indeed, one of the pervasive beliefs about cultural space is that exclusions are not invested or interested. Simply put, the exclusion and derogation of disability reinforces the privilege of those who are included and valued. Snyder and Mitchell show that the "bereftness" of the disabled subject serves an essential epistemological function in the identity formation of those who consider themselves "normal." This inversion lies at the heart of Mitchell and Snyder's take on modernity. In their words, in the late nineteenth century, "disabled bodies [were] constructed as unduly discordant within a rapidly solidifying fiction of an idealized American body politic" (23). In the evolving relationship between the U.S and Europe at this same time, commonality across the Atlantic "was marked not in the likeness of their valued citizens, but rather in the existence of a common social dis-ease with the biologically stigmatized … racialized and disabled others were catapulted to the status of transatlantic pariahs" (129). Mitchell and Snyder reveal that the concept of modernity itself relies on locating and isolating disability. The impact of this framing and fixing of disability lingers. Mitchell and Snyder show that any reading of the cultural products of modernity must recognize the ways that such marking functions.

<5> The idea that disability is purely a natural phenomenon is one of the key historical and theoretical targets for the revisionist work of this book. This also extends earlier work by Mitchell and Snyder, most notably their influential book *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000), in which they examined the discursive tropes and cultural stereotypes that proscribe meanings of disability, particularly in film and literature, and *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (1997), a co-edited collection which critiques historical representations of disability. In all of this work, Mitchell and Snyder put forward a cultural model of disability, a model of interest to scholars in the arts and humanities because it suggests that discourses and institutions play a role in shaping bodies. This model is also of importance because it works against one of the key cultural and institutional forces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the eugenics movement. Mitchell and Snyder define eugenics as the "designation of pathology as a transmissible characteristic of human biology" and the "hegemonic formation of exclusionary practices based on scientific deviancy" (70, 73). The mark of eugenic sentiment and application can be found on each of the cultural locations they study, and the book convincingly critiques the racist science upon which these eugenic attitudes were based.   When the authors suggest a means of understanding disability that moves beyond scientific and biological definitions and diagnoses, then, they are also responding to the

lingering effect of eugenic sentiment, and making a political statement. So long as disability is seen as biological defect, so long as disability is seen as rooted firmly in the body, then the only efforts to address disability can be through kill or cure. Their cultural model sees disability as "largely, but not strictly synonymous with sites of cultural oppression," recognizing the ways that institutions and discourses construct an oppressive experience of disability (6). This model allows for "a political act of renaming that designates disability as a site of resistance and a source of cultural agency" (10). Readers of this journal will likely recognize this approach as resonant with postmodern feminist theorization of gender construction, and indeed Mitchell and Snyder do an excellent job explaining how disability has been historically used in service of other exclusive and oppressive constructions, including the discursive fields of race and gender — as they say, disability has been the "master trope of human disqualification" (125). In these ways, an understanding of the historical and cultural definitions of disability put forward in this book can serve to illuminate across fields of inquiry.

<6> Part I of *Cultural Locations of Disability* constitutes a comprehensive revisionist history of disability in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, read through literature, politics, and public institutions. The first specific site that Mitchell and Snyder examine is the nineteenth-century charity industry, focusing on Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857) as a text that "exposes the social construction of disability as one of an array of fictions supporting charity as a restrictive cultural locale in capitalism's repertoire of exclusionary tactics" (68). They also show how Melville's work heralds the coming of eugenics, the focus of their second chapter. Mitchell and Snyder are also the editors of the forthcoming collection *Eugenics in America 1848-1945: A History of Disability in Primary Sources* (2008), and the second chapter of *Cultural Locations of Disability* provides a more succinct overview of this particularly dark period in American history, focusing on the implementation of eugenic doctrine in asylums and schools. Importantly, Mitchell and Snyder reveal how widespread and widely popular eugenic science and sentiment were in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America. Their third chapter then explores how this American movement inspired the Nazi eugenics program. They suggest that in Germany, the murder of disabled people (the "T4" program) constituted the origin of the Holocaust, and they suggest that even during the Nazi regime, eugenics was a transatlantic phenomenon, a result of ongoing "collaboration" and an "unprecedented level of scientific and governmental exchange" between the U.S and Europe (103). Mitchell and Snyder build on Paul Gilroy's notion of the "Black Atlantic" in putting forward a vision of the "Eugenic Atlantic" to explain this ongoing interrelation. But the authors' re-purposing of Gilroy's work here is questionable (101). Really, the task is too large for one chapter. Given such brief development, the danger is that Mitchell and Snyder might be seen as co-opting Gilroy's work and replacing his focus on race with a focus on disability. Of course, what they are trying to do is just the opposite, offering "parallels between race and disability as dehumanizing formations … fold[ing] disability and race into a mutual project of human exclusion … developed within modernity" (101). Yet Mitchell and Snyder simply don't have enough space to develop such a relationship fully in this particular chapter — they cannot carefully separate their alliance from other, less sophisticated "like race" comparisons. This said, their thesis deserves attention and thought by future scholars and could be further developed, one hopes, through their own future work.

<7> Part II of the book, "Echoes of Eugenics," sets out to trace the pervasive effects of the history recounted in the book's first section, jumping ahead in time to the approximate present. In chapter 4, Mitchell and Snyder critique the films of Frederick Wiseman, which document the everyday regimes at the Helen Keller Institute for the Deaf and Blind, in order to put forward a vision of disability "after the panopticon" in the disciplinary space of the institution, a contemporary "kinder and gentler" incarcerating and disciplining setting than those Foucault focused on (134). These spaces illustrate something of the new disciplining of disability, mixing old and new corporeal regimes and allowing for the illusion of agency in oppressive and sometimes abusive contexts. The critical work here aligns with the efforts of disability activists such as Harriet McBryde Johnson ("The New Disability Gulag") and activist groups such as ADAPT (American Disabled For Attendant Programs Today), recognizing that "kinder and gentler" incarceration in nursing homes and institutions extends the legacy of eugenics and perpetuates cultural constructions of the disabled as charity cases and "bereft subjects."

<8> In chapter 5, Mitchell and Snyder also attempt to create an "anatomy of disability in film" through the concept of filmic "body genres," borrowed from the work of Linda Williams (161). In their useful taxonomy, these genres include slasher films, superhero science fiction, melodramatic "weepies," buddy films that rely on physical comedy and juvenile humor, and finally "new disability documentary cinema," a genre in which the authors themselves figure prominently as film-makers. Throughout Part II of the book, Mitchell and Snyder do an excellent job of mapping the tropes and narrative uses of disability in film. Yet many of the "echoes of eugenics" from the first part of the book aren't fully sensed by this reader in the second section. For instance, the transatlantic connections and considerations of race and disability, themes the authors address in Part I, seem dropped once we arrive at Part II of the book. Certainly, considering filmic "body genres" requires attention to *both* race and disability. And the work of the authors themselves in documenting the history of disability in Germany (see their film *A World Without Bodies*) creates a new transatlantic exchange of knowledge that counters the eugenic exchange they document in Part I, though they never comment on this reversal. Mitchell and Snyder might have tried to continue the complex "folding" of the map of disability that the first section of the book began (158). These criticisms aside, chapter 5, "Body Genres and Disability Sensations," would serve as an excellent introductory text for undergraduates as it is a thorough survey of the uses of disability in film, and the reactions to these depictions that have been mounted by the disability community.

<9> Remaining in the classroom, Part III of the book, "Institutionalizing Disability Studies," looks at the discipline of disability studies as it has taken a place in the contemporary American university. Mitchell and Snyder themselves have held positions within disability studies departments at the University of Illinois, Chicago, where Mitchell served as director of one of only three Ph.D. programs in the world. Snyder remains at UIC, while Mitchell has recently taken over directorship of the Institute on Disabilities at Temple University. Therefore, their perspective on disability studies is informed by their leadership positions within the field. Their positions, however, don't necessarily translate into a tone of ease within academia. Considering the fact that, during the eugenics era, American universities were key sites for experimentation *on* people with disabilities and for the promulgation of racist science, and considering the fact that disability studies programs are often literally located *beside* other academic programs that advocate for therapeutic approaches and impairment-based research, the relatively new position

of disability studies programs inside academia is accompanied by suspicion and worry. Indeed, Mitchell and Snyder recognize a "situation of oppositions" and a "history of subject/object divisions in U.S disability research" (191, 22). They emphasize the power that comes from the "force of destabilization" that disability studies might create in this historical and spatial context (203). Finally, Mitchell and Snyder suggest that through venues such as these destabilizing yet "institutionalized" programs, through outlets such as disability documentary film, working critically against the dominant tropes of Hollywood "body genres," and through a critical understanding of the history and legacy of eugenics, the cultural locations of disability can shift, can be renovated. The book then maps a move "from the passive position of the silenced object of discourse in the cultural locations of disability to the active position of producer of knowledge about social, political, and phenomenological aspects of disability" (203). This is a move that the authors themselves have been instrumental in facilitating over the past fifteen years. The move gains momentum through the promotion of activist disability culture and scholarship. In this way, a book such as *Cultural Locations of Disability* serves not just as a useful resource, but also as an imperative to readers to chart themselves into this history, recognize their place in its legacy, and to make space for new understandings of the bodies in their research, their art, and their classrooms.

Endnotes

(1)Brendan Gleeson, *Geographies of Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 2.(^)

(2)Tanya Titchkosky and Rod Michalko, "Putting Disability in its Place: It's Not a Joking Matter," in *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*, ed. James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001) 217.(^)