

**Disability's Textual Dissonance**

*Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation.* Ato Quayson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 246 pp.

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<1> The cover photo of *Aesthetic Nervousness* depicts a girl with a dazed expression, prominent front teeth, and a wheelchair, encouraging the reader to interpret her as physically and cognitively disabled. The reader is also invited to see her as the source of the “nervousness” to which the book’s title refers; however, Ato Quayson’s book is not primarily focused on the “nervousness” disability causes the reader (though this is mentioned), but on the ways that disability troubles textual politics and the ways that stories “work.” Admittedly bothered by the photo, I located the original stock version by Abraham Menashe,<sup>(1)</sup> which shows the girl in a park setting surrounded by fallen leaves, with her purse and what seems to be a water bottle on the back of her wheelchair. In this original image, the girl looks young and bored, like any other child on a family or school trip, and quite unlike the adapted cover shot, which gloomily focuses on the girl’s expression and darkens the daylight, leaves, and purse. The unsettling dissonance I discovered between the original and adapted photos mirrors Quayson’s insistence on not only judging disability representations, but digging deeper to find the full story and assessing how disability both constitutes and complicates textual representation.

<2> Quayson explains that “aesthetic nervousness is seen when the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability,” and he emphasizes that aesthetic nervousness is not so much about disabled characters but about the ways that disability challenges literary modes. His analyses focus on how aesthetic nervousness can be detected in the relationships of disabled and nondisabled characters, how it is “refracted across other levels of text,” and how it exists in the connection of texts and abled/disabled readers (15). Quayson builds on the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (though he does not focus primarily on gender), as well as Lennard Davis’ idea that social deformation, as represented through disabled characters, is inherent to the structure of novels (particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries).<sup>(2)</sup> Quayson takes this idea further and claims that “some form of physical or mental deformation” is likely “relevant for the discussion of *all* literary texts,” given disability’s cultural and historical ubiquity (22). Quayson also compares aesthetic nervousness to David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s concept of “narrative prosthesis.” While these authors position literary disability as a textual stumbling block that is untrue to

sociocultural realities,(3) Quayson also contends that disability results in “aesthetic collapse... within the literary frameworks themselves” (25). A drawback of the otherwise thorough introduction is its attempt to quickly sum up disability history. The goals in presenting this history – to show how disability is read as an “‘excessive’ sign,” creates “subliminal and moral panic,” and has a “multifaceted and even contradictory” history (14) – are important but could have been achieved without the rushed history. Increased attention to leading disability historians (like Paul Longmore) and the period of the texts analyzed (the twentieth century) would have been useful.

<3> The second chapter identifies nine literary-disability metaphors, such as “disability as epiphany” (36-37) and “disability as signifier of ritual insight” (47). The last of the nine representations, “disability as normality,” refers to instances where disability “is used as a pointed critique of social hypocrisy and indeed of social institutions as such” (52), and this might also be thought of as “disability as diversity.” This typology is a “productive heuristic map” for the book (36), and would be useful for literature students new to disability studies. The close-reading chapters focus on Samuel Beckett, Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, J. M. Coetzee, and the history of Robben Island. The chapters can be read in isolation (and it can be difficult to connect them), and I comment on a few highlights below.

<4> In the Beckett chapter, subtitled “Disability as Hermeneutical Impasse,” Quayson connects the concepts of pain and disability, noting that Beckett’s plays are defined by a “structure of skeptical interlocution” that interrogates all issues except pain (64). The clever connection of pain and disability is made early in the chapter, and readers might use Michael Davidson’s article on Beckett as a companion piece.(4) (I must also briefly note my concern with the defense of the term “wheelchair-bound” in a footnote, as wanting to emphasize the prominent role of the chair did not justify this terminology for me.)

<5> Chapter 4 explores Morrison’s complex and ambiguous deployment of disability, particularly Consolata’s blindness in *Paradise* (1999), Eva Peace in *Sula* (1974), and the relationship of disability and slavery in *Beloved* (1987). Of interest is Quayson’s reading of motherhood and disability, as he claims that “the epiphanic moments in which maternity is brought into question are only evident in relation to the physically disabled female characters in Morrison” (113). This assumes that the mother-child relationship is “already fraught for nondisabled women with children with disabilities,” and that this is “accentuated” when the mother is herself disabled (100). This reading, which complicates Garland-Thomson’s reading of Eva Peace in *Extraordinary Bodies*,(5) is convincing and invites interpretation of whether all mother-child relationships in Morrison’s texts are similarly “fraught.”

<6> Chapter 5 focuses on the work of Nigerian author Soyinka and takes up some of Quayson’s previous scholarship on Freud and the systemic uncanny.(6) He provides readings of *The Strong Breed* (1963) and *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), suggesting that these texts demonstrate relationships “between disability, ritual contagion, and the quest for privileged insight by the nondisabled characters” (118). This chapter connects to disability a bit less directly, as does chapter 7, which reads the history of Robben Island from a literary standpoint. While a bit more background would have helped me better understand these lesser-known subjects and texts, these

chapters delightfully shift away from canonical Western authors who have already received disability analysis (such as Morrison and Beckett).

<7> Chapter 6 focuses on autism in Coetzee's work and is a daring and engaging chapter. Quayson focuses on "the silent or inarticulate character who seems to opt for silence in negotiating the vicissitudes of social existence" (147), and he claims such characters are often racial "others" with physical and/or cognitive impairments (149). Quayson reads *The Life and Times of Michael K* (1984) and identifies its eponymous character as autistic by focusing on his preference for silence, fixation on objects and patterns, and tendency toward repetitive motions (155), while also noting the significant barriers in reading Michael K as autistic (163). In connecting Michael K to the protagonist with autism in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* (2003), Quayson forms interesting literary lineages of autism, though whether either representation is true to real-life experiences of autism is questionable. Still, the reading of Michael K as autistic poses fascinating questions about the role of (racialized) silence in Coetzee's work and might be read alongside Krista Ratcliffe's work on rhetorical listening and race.(7)

<8> In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson critiques aesthetic approaches to analyzing disability, noting: "[W]hen literary critics look at disabled characters, they often interpret them metaphorically or aesthetically, reading them without political awareness as conventional elements of the sentimental, Gothic, or grotesque traditions" (10). Quayson's work does not fall into this trap, as he focuses on how disability causes a "suspension, collapse, or general short-circuiting of ... dominant protocols of representation that may have governed a text" (26). In doing this, he refuses to reaffirm disability tropes and brings fresh focus to non-Western and colonial/postcolonial views of disability. Still, in focusing on aesthetics, the book risks sidelining sociopolitical aspects of disability, and some may find that the important goal of developing a "rigorous set of reading practices alive to the implications of disability" (208) could be complemented by the activist considerations of disability studies.

<9> It is not that scholarship on literature and disability studies *has* to do activist work, but it seems that this book wants to. In discussing Snyder and Mitchell's *Narrative Prosthesis*, Quayson notes that "the ultimate test of the salience of a disability representation are the various social and cultural contexts within which they might be thought to have a broader effect" (25), but the book does not substantially move into such territory. Similarly, the preface and conclusion engage personal and activist connections to disability that aren't fully taken up. In the preface, Quayson thoughtfully ponders his father's disability and notes: "The impulse behind writing this book is to pose to the universe the inchoate but pressing questions I had wanted to ask him" (xiii). I had hoped to see his father reappear in the conclusion, but Quayson instead turns to the significant experience of returning home for the signing of the Ghana Persons with Disability Act. He asks: "What is the relationship between aesthetic nervousness and an occasion such as this?" (207). To answer this, he again asserts the need for rigorous reading and interpreting practices, with which I heartily agree, but this answer felt somehow partial. The beginning and end of this book, as well as the final chapter on Robben Island, invite a discussion of how the thoughtful reading practices Quayson endorses might connect to activist and experiential aspects of disability.

<10> Such is the nature of an exciting book like this one: it makes the reader want more, even though it already accomplishes a great deal. The idea that disability alters – or to use Quayson’s persistent metaphor, “short circuits” – textual and narrative functions is a fascinating one. What Quayson’s book gestures toward are future analyses of the ways that such short-circuiting might positively function: that is, the ways that disability as diversity, disability pride, and disability as not only difference but exceptionality might be, and increasingly are, impacting the aesthetics this book interrogates.

#### Endnotes

- (1) This image can be considered in the context of Menashe’s many disability images:  
<http://www.humanistic-photography.com/cgi-bin/ImageFolio3/imageFolio.cgi?action=view&link=GENERAL/disabilities/general&image=243-08-19.JPG&img=160&tt=>.(^)
- (2) Lennard Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).(^)
- (3) David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).(^)
- (4) Michael Davidson, “Every Man His Specialty: Beckett, Disability, and Dependence,” *Journal of Literary Disability* 1 (2007): 55-68. (^)
- (5) Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).(^)
- (6) Ato Quayson, *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), and “Symbolic Compulsions: Testing a Psychoanalytic Category on Postcolonial African Criticism,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 73 (2004): 754-772. (^)
- (7) Krista Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).(^)