

Running Head: CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

“Context is Everything”:  
Reading Representations of the Body

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## INTRODUCTION

At least since Philoctetes was bitten by the snake, authors have made use of representations of disability and readers have been interpreting those representations, most often interpreting non-normative characteristics as metaphor for or symbol of impoverished psychological, emotional, and physical health and wellness.<sup>1</sup> In current literary scholarship, bodies with difference, or what Rosemarie Garland Thomson has called “extraordinary bodies,” are often glossed by the same readers for whom it is commonplace to employ cultural-studies based reading methods on representations of gender and race (Garland Thomson, 1997). For example, as author and critic Toni Morrison makes the case for awareness of Africanist constructions in Western literature, she effaces the ableist construction of the body both in texts and in her own argument. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison explores Sapphira, the white, female protagonist who uses a wheelchair, in Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*; Morrison has argued, “[The novel] concerns a troubled, disappointed woman [Sapphira] confined to the prison of her defeated flesh” (Morrison, 2004, p. 1014). Thus, while Morrison seeks to illuminate the social construction of race, she supports dominant cultural assumptions about people with disabilities and participates in the continued effacement of their political identity as a cultural community.

While people with disabilities, along with other cultural minority groups, have been called an “invisible minority,” contemporary American novels do not avoid representations of them. In fact, David Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest* (1997) reads simultaneously like a medical textbook of disabling conditions and a fetishist paean, while novelists like Harry Crews and Chuck Palahniuk foreground characters with difference in many, if not an outright majority, of their novels. However, these representations most often do not break from the traditional conventions established in ableist ideology, despite the author’s avowal to do so.<sup>2</sup> Disability studies has been slowly enabling the humanities, and this trend will continue as more scholarship

emerges that examines the social construction of disability and non-disability, as well as notions of health, wellness, and illness across a range of disciplines. Now, new methods are available for explicating representations of disability, and these methods reveal implicit power relationships between a dominant class and the newly emergent historic bloc of people with disabilities. However, the identification of these relationships is not an end in itself: What is to be gained by merely locating evidence and claiming that a representation is racist, sexist, or ableist?

The first object of this investigation has been to (re)claim an identity for people with disabilities as a political minority. In U.S. culture, disability has been considered pathological for almost a century. Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, disabilities were medicalized, framed as instances of corporeal or cognitive defects that should be corrected in order, ostensibly, to enhance the person with disability's quality of life. As disability-rights activists secured federal human-rights legislation for people with disabilities (notably in the 1968 Architectural Barrier Act and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act), the cultural perception of disability began to shift. This legislation and the awareness that occasioned it have disrupted the United States' systematic marginalization of people with disabilities and destabilized *de facto* (and oftentimes *de jure*) practices of confinement and discrimination. Contemporary disability-studies scholars such as Lennard J. Davis, Paul K. Longmore, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson have sought to reclaim the concept of disability from the province of medicine and to relocate it in the province of politics, positing that "disability" as a term denotes an ethnicity—a socially-constructed way of living that articulates and codifies a system of beliefs and social practices that is not situated in the body (Garland Thomson, 1997, p. 6).<sup>3</sup>

Before one can examine the ideological work of fictional representations of people with disabilities, however, one might consider the novel itself and the act of reading. As the poet, critic, and translator Richard Howard (1974) has asked in his preface for Roland Barthes *S/Z*, "have we even learned to 'indict' reading?" Novels are

ubiquitous as to seem inherent, as if the genre were an essential part of human activity, but such a supposition overshadows the reality of the novel as a specific literary form shaped by historical context. By considering the constituent elements of the novel and the cultural contexts that determine them, a reader can more fully examine how and what meaning the novel attempts to make as well as what the reader actually does while engaged in novel reading. Both areas of investigation provide alternative schemes for interpreting the novel itself and the significance of its representations with respect to characters with disabilities.

By explicating representations of characters with bodily difference, one can perceive how disability and mixed interactions—an interaction between a presumably normative character and a character with an impairment—have been shaped by the articulation of historically-specific strategies of representation, novelistic conventions, and ideological commonplaces. In novels, characters with bodily difference traditionally function as mannequins upon which dominant culture can drape its anxieties about deviance and its own fragile state of non-disability. By decoding the contemporary character with bodily difference, one can begin to understand the extent to which human interaction is shaped not by lived experience, but by mediated and ideologically-charged fictive representations. Toward this end, novelist Jonathan Lethem's representation of Lionel Essrog, the protagonist-with-Tourette's-syndrome in the novel *Motherless Brooklyn* (2000), illustrates the continued presence of ableist ideology at work in representations of impairment that seem on the surface to be progressive. By describing how these representations function, criticism can reveal a little bit about how we, as readers of novels in particular historical moments, use narrative, what we truly believe, and how we live those beliefs.

## **BODY**

### **The Project(s) of Disability Studies**

*the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence...but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, "permanent persuader"* (Gramsci, 2001, p. 1141).

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the impact of representation on the ways people comprehend material reality is debated not in terms of *if*, but *in what ways*.

Representation does not reflect the material world; representation helps to shape it. As Christopher Lasch (1985) has claimed, "More and more our impressions of the world derive not from the observations we make both as individuals and members of a wider community but from elaborate systems of communication" (as cited in Davis, 1987, p. 5). According to this claim, one's sense of reality is dependent upon one's interpretation of various signs, and one's beliefs and actions are informed or determined by those same interpretations.<sup>4</sup> The implicit charge, then, is to understand methods of literary representation and to reveal the ideological work they do—not simply in theory, but in practice.

Lennard J. Davis, a Marxist critic and disability-studies scholar, has defined the project of disability studies through the end of the twentieth century as work of the first wave. The first wave in any minority-culture struggle, Davis has suggested, is a period of consensus building during which the cultural group establishes a collective identity that defines itself against preexisting culturally-determined definitions of identity which tend to be oppressive or limiting. Davis has cited slogans such as "Black is Beautiful" and "Deaf Power" as examples of this type of identity reinscription (2002, p. 10). In short, the project of the first wave is to take what had been considered marginal, defective, or other and to demystify and legitimize it. If allowed to become static, Davis has contended, first wave identity politics can replicate the very systems of dominant culture that restrain them within the minority culture itself, thus the need for theorists

to build upon work of the first wave. Davis has argued that the second wave embraces difference within the minority culture, and the focus shifts from delimiting the minority culture to interrogating the standards against which the minority culture is judged. By allowing the dominant order to exist without challenge, academics inadvertently manufacture consent and establish fields of knowledge that seem as essential as those they displace. The second wave of disability studies, according to Davis, disrupts concepts of hegemonic normalcy.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997) has traced the origins of contemporary American discourses of normalcy and difference to antiquity, while Davis (1997) has located the origins of these discourses in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Garland Thomson has posited the fourth book of Aristotle's *Generation of Animals* as a beginning, citing, "anyone who does not take after his parents is really in a way a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type" (qtd. in Garland Thomson, 1997, p. 19). According to this definition, if an offspring exhibits characteristics that are not visible in the parents, those characteristics serve as proof of the child's deviance, his or her monstrosity. Aristotle's claim is a useful example for establishing the contingent, arbitrary nature of disability. In this text Aristotle does not establish a specific hierarchy of desirable and stigmatized traits, but he establishes a relative definition of difference (monstrosity) that relies upon a subjective set of criteria (the parents' characteristics) conceptualized as a norm. Garland Thomson (1996) has compounded her indictment by arguing that, "Aristotle initiates in the *Nicomachean Ethics* the devaluation recognizable today, claiming that a norm depending upon a mean represents virtue and superiority while an excess of or departure from that standard constitutes vice."

The virtue of the mean reaches full flower in the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the rise of statistics, according to Davis (1997). Statistics, he has written, inaugurates the development of the discourse of normalcy, a phenomenon he has traced to the Industrial Revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his article

“Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century,” Davis has argued that the first usage of the word “normal” meaning “constituting, conforming to, not deviating or different from” occurs in 1840, thereby suggesting the concurrent reification of the concept (1997, p. 10).<sup>5</sup> As Davis has written, “The connection between the body and industry is tellingly revealed in the fact that the leading members of the first British statistical societies formed in the 1830s and 1840s were industrialists or had close ties to industry” (1997, p. 11). The application of statistics to the body—for the purposes of work and maintaining a stable state—initiates what Davis has called “the hegemony of normalcy,” a development that supplants the concept of the ideal with the average.

With the valorization of the bell curve, English statisticians conceptualized norming the distribution of traits, a notion of perfecting the race by eliminating deviations, or errors, from the curve.<sup>6</sup> The process of norming recalibrated notions of the ideal; instead of being resolved to a shared second-order (non-ideal) existence, *l’homme moyen* embodied the average.<sup>7</sup> Davis has argued that by replacing the bell curve with the ogive, a curve that trended upward to points on the line that represented “superior” deviations (i.e. exceptional strength or intelligence, height, etc.), Sir Francis Galton—an English statistician and eugenicist—fused the concept of the divine ideal with the norming function of statistics. English society now accepted that physical and intellectual traits were hierarchically ranked and that those traits in the most-favored quartile were a new ideal (Davis, 1997, p. 16-17). In dominant culture, new gods walked among deviants and the stratification that once separated the mortal from the divine now irrevocably delimited the differences of those who fell short of the highest quartile.<sup>8</sup>

Either cast as deviant for displaying qualities unobserved in one’s parents or marginalized for lack of upper-quartile characteristics in relation to one’s peers, the body with difference has been constructed as stigmatized. Articulated to notions of scientific and industrial progress, these stigmatizing assumptions were exported to the United States. Marked as other, the person with bodily difference, especially one with a

visible disability, was considered less than human, as the history of the treatment of people with disabilities in the United States shows. With knowledge of the historically-contingent perceptions of disability in American culture, a reader can better interpret literary representations of bodily difference, for those representations are articulated to historical moments.

In the article “Disability Rights: From Caste to Class in the Context of Civil Rights,” Robert Funk (1985) has suggested four developmental phases in the perception of disability throughout U.S. history. A brief reiteration of the developmental stages he has defined will help to establish the contexts for representations of people with disabilities. According to Funk, Phase 1 (1700-1920) was marked by the “warehousing” of people with disabilities, a development characterized as “a move from total indifference by organized society to a recognition of the need for at least minimum care” (1987, p. 9). During this time, people with disabilities were involuntarily institutionalized *en masse* and were often provided with little to no care.<sup>9</sup> Phase 2 (1920-1960) introduced the notion of care through the articulation of an expanding medical-professional industry with “massive total-care institutions to house disabled persons [who were] deemed unable to function in organized society” (1987, p. 11). The medicalization of bodily difference reframed these bodies; no longer considered prodigious, the body with difference was considered sick, and medical science must heal, or norm, these deviations (Garland Thomson, 1996). Phase 3 (1960-1975) included the rise of disability rights as a social movement, one that was encouraged by the successes of other minority-rights activism. During Phase 3, U.S. courts began to recognize that the appeals of people with disabilities for equal opportunity were not occasions for charity or compensation, but requests for basic human and civil rights. Grass-roots disability-rights groups began to flourish, and the Berkeley Center for Independent Living provided a model for how people with disabilities could determine their needs and how best to meet them without large group institutions (1987, p. 14-15). Finally, Phase 4 (1975-1985) was distinguished by the quickened spread of the

concept of disability rights as civil rights and a proliferation of court cases that both supported and limited the provisions of disability-rights legislation passed into U.S. law beginning in the early 1970's.

Although Funk's history culminates in 1985, the year of publication, his "Letter from the Executive Director" (2007) suggests that Phase 4 remains operative. As director of Paraquad, a pioneering Center for Independent Living founded during Phase 3, Funk has written, "As [Paraquad] set[s] the course for the future, we must look into our past and reclaim our identity as a consumer-controlled organization that advocates policy and system change ... so [people with disabilities] have the tools and resources to achieve their life goals" (Funk, 2007). In this statement, Funk has claimed that the goals in Phase 4 remain the goals at present. Despite the passage of subsequent legislation, most-notably the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, Funk has asserted that the goals of disability-rights activists have not yet been fully realized. The deployment of ableist representations of disability accounts in part for this lack of progress.

As disability was reframed as a socially-constructed minority culture, new ways of thinking about disability and representations of it have become possible.<sup>10</sup> Because the novel itself can function as a cultural practice that stabilizes dominant ideology, the novel and novel reading provide exemplary sites for understanding the effects of transmissions of ideology that representations of difference (or normalcy) augur. Whereas traditional analyses of characters with bodily difference concerned the explication of the symbolic meaning of stigmatized traits, a process in which the bodily difference *stood for* another (often moral) aspect of the characterization, critics began in earnest to examine the ideological work of those representations as they shape concepts of normalcy and deviance within dominant culture (Garland Thomson, 1997, p. 10-11). In order to interrogate these representations, disability studies must acknowledge not just the presence of signifiers of disability, but how those signifiers are purposefully deployed in literature and processed by those who read them.

### **The Immersed Experience & The Cultural Work of the Novel**

The act of reading always transcends pastime: cultural assumptions about reading and literature serve ideological functions, and the effects of literary representation help shape the reader's perception of material reality. The American educational system begins to proselytize the social practice of reading early in a student's life. Reflecting upon his own early education, Davis (1987) has remarked that reading was presented as "a form of accruing valuable capital that would help in later life" (Davis, 1987, p. 7). On the cultural capital of literacy, particularly novel reading, Davis (1987) has concluded, "novels were not only worth reading but [he also learned that] anyone who was anyone ... would surely be someone who read novels" (p. 7-8). Aside from the potential material rewards articulated to the cultural practice of novel reading, many readers engage in novel reading as a form of socially-approved escapism—unlike playing a video game or riding a skateboard, reading a novel both can be fun and has an established cultural value. Framed as a socially-sanctioned and intellectually-rich activity, reading is not commonly subject to interrogation, and the notion that such a seemingly benevolent activity could, in fact, enforce reactionary ideology is not commonly held.

In his essay "States of Reading," Sven Birkerts (1998) has argued that readers of novels expect a "successful," or "immersed," reading experience to enact profound changes upon them (p. 50). These changes do not necessarily correspond to conscious changes in the reader's beliefs or attitudes after encountering an author's persuasive rhetoric, although these changes certainly can occur. The subtle, often unnoticed changes Birkerts has illustrated are more fundamental, and they involve what he has called a "change of state" in the reader. When one reads, Birkerts has claimed, "We experience almost immediately a transposition...of our customary perception of reality" (Birkerts, p. 50). Birkerts has suggested that these changes occur in the reader's sense of time—both as the dependable chronology of daily life is supplanted by the author's

use of sequential or non-sequential time and in the discrepancy between the passage of time in the narrative and the passage of time spent reading—and in his or her “meaning structure of the world” (Birkerts, p. 50). Once subjected to a non-chronological sense of time, the reader’s understanding of meaning, Birkerts has posed, becomes predominantly associative, not causal. Thus, the reader’s meaning structure of the world is subordinated to the meaning structure of the novel, its “world of relevancy” (Stierle cited in Davis, 1987), and at least for the duration of the immersed reading experience, the reader is changed.

Many contemporary critics—from a variety of theoretical schools—consider this transformation a necessary condition if the reader is to encounter what has been called “the ethical situation” of the text (Hale, 2007). According to Dorothy J. Hale (2007), this transformation results from the reader’s “self-binding,” his or her willful submission to a text, a decision that Hale has claimed compels the reader “to submit to something outside the self.” The hailing toward the ethical consideration of alterity, Hale has argued, is endemic to the novel. Because a reader may already possess “the will to believe in the possibility of alterity,” a reader who self-binds and confronts a fictive Other can develop “social emotions, ones with profound transformative potential” (Hale, 2007, p. 189 p. 190). This concept is attractive to contemporary literary scholars who align themselves with cultural studies and civic justice, and if proven it would provide another plank for the Gramscian platform of the organic, engaged intellectual who perceives him- or herself as performing a social good.<sup>11</sup> In fact, self-binding seems like the literary panacea disability studies has been seeking.

However, not all immersed experiences and self-binding are progressive. In *Resisting Novels: Fiction and Ideology* (1987), Davis claims that the other cannot be found within the novel *per se*, although he does not claim that alterity is impossible. Davis has argued that changes of state—or the reader’s subjugation (self-willed or otherwise) to “worlds of relevancy”—encourage docility in the reader and prepare him or her to receive the hegemonic codes that novelistic conventions disseminate.<sup>12</sup> Despite

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1982) claims for the flexibility and polyglossia of the genre, Davis has suggested that the form was fully conventionalized into stasis by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is ultimately univocal.<sup>13</sup> For example, the conventions of characterization render the nebulousness of identity as a knowable quantity through a few overdetermined details. While secondary education in literature often suggests that "good" novels have both "round characters," meaning main characters represented with mimetic fullness who change during the course of the narrative, and "flat characters," meaning ancillary characters represented with only one or two qualities, one might make the argument that this hierarchy should be replaced and that characters might be classified according to a continuum of flatness. As Davis (1987) has shown, novelistic characterization is dependent on moral and physical simplification.<sup>14</sup> A character's few defining qualities, Davis has argued, resonate within the context of the representation's particular historical moment. Ironically, as Davis points out, the fewer qualities attributed to a character, the more "knowable" that character becomes.

Davis' argument shares much with Walter Lippmann's original definition of "stereotype," although contemporary usage dilutes much of the original meaning. According to Lippmann:

[A stereotype] is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. .... They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy. (qtd. in Dyer, 2002)

Within this definition, one sees that a stereotype's presumed functionality—quickly ordering an otherwise disorderly identity into a "knowable" type—intersects with Davis' description of novelistic convention as ideological defense. Lippmann has suggested that the ideological purpose of developing a stereotype is to label an external object as

negative in order to defend one's own sense of neutral propriety against any incursions or deviations attributed to the labeled type. Davis (1987) has echoed these defensive functions in his argument on characterization, and he adds that authors select specific traits based upon their presumed capacity to engender a high level of identification with the reader. The ideological work of such simplified characterizations, Davis has argued, is to affirm the normalcy of the reader while supporting the ideas that personality is comprehensible and narratological (revealed through the purposeful deployment of select mental and physical attributes) and that changing one's personality is possible.

The cultural, ideological work of characterization has perhaps greater power when that character is represented as a member of a minority culture. In dominant culture, such characters cannot be completely normed through a single word or deed for the power of a single stigmatizing trait inflects one's entire perceived identity. Davis' concepts of characterization pertain to characters with disabilities; however, the already-scarce number of characteristics in a "normal" character is further reduced in a character with disability. Characters with disabilities, Rosemarie Garland Thomson has claimed, are constructed overwhelmingly from single presumptive "traits, qualities, and behaviors [...] with much rhetorical emphasis [given] simply by omitting—and therefore erasing—other factors or traits that might mitigate or complicate the delineations" (Garland Thomson, 1997).<sup>15</sup> These traits function as signifiers for signifieds that are themselves based upon stereotypical presumptions. As such, characters are "enveloped by the otherness that their disability signals in the text," depicted as "freaks, stripped of normalizing contexts and engulfed by a single stigmatic trait" (Garland Thomson, 1997).<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, she has suggested that characters with disabilities are always represented as "other to the reader—identifiably human but resolutely different" (Garland Thomson, 1997).<sup>17</sup> The traditional function of characters with disabilities is twofold. On one hand, their otherness, their difference, demarcates the threshold of deviance, while on the other, their difference normalizes more fully an already "normal" protagonist and a presumptively normal reader (Davis "Normalcy" 22).

These normalizing aims of representations of disability are typically achieved through the author's deployment of stigmatized characteristics. If these specific functions are articulated to Davis' broadly-defined functions and to Lippmann's definition of stereotype, one can see how representations of disability render the seemingly-foreign as eminently known, encapsulate difference in a clearly delimited other, and reaffirm the normativity of a main character through which the reader has his or her own normativity affirmed. A brief reading of a contemporary novelistic representation of disability can suggest how a new cultural awareness of disability through the articulation of civil-rights legislation and academic scholarship has or has not developed. By examining Lionel Essrog, the narrator and gangster-come-detective who has Tourette's syndrome in Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (2000),<sup>18</sup> as representative of the development of representations of disability in contemporary American fiction, one might gauge the material success of the first and second wave.

From the opening sentence of the novel, Lethem attempts to unsettle the reader's presumptions about reading the text, an unsettling coincidental with an unsettling of the representation of Lionel's neurological impairment. Rendered as a statement of direct discourse, Lionel tells the reader, "Context is everything," establishing that, in the world as constructed in this novel, a fact is not as important as the way in which it is framed (Lethem, 2000). Lionel continues, "Dress me up and see. I'm a carnival barker, an auctioneer, a downtown performance artist, a speaker in tongues, a senator drunk on filibuster. *I've got Tourette's. My mouth won't quit*" (Lethem, 2000, p. 1, emphasis in original). Through this passage, Lionel provides six possible interpretations of his identity based upon divergent, context-based readings of a single characteristic, his vocal ticcing. Lionel suggests that his identity is dependant in part upon others' perceptions of him; his claim suggests that witnesses of his ticcing quickly assimilate his actions into specific types and (mistakenly) label him.<sup>19</sup> Thus, he acknowledges that one single characteristic determines his social identity, and Lethem, through Lionel's discourse, points out the fallibility in such a determination. By placing

emphasis on the phrase “*I’ve got Tourette’s*,” though, Lionel seems to supplant misrepresentations with a factual self definition, and Lethem foregrounds the single characteristic, or lens, through which Lionel will view the world of the novel.

When Lionel becomes a Minna Man, the collective name for the four employees of Frank Minna, and learns about Tourette’s syndrome, he uses his new context and knowledge to re-calibrate his previous sense of identity and to frame almost every situation he encounters in the future. Prior to his self diagnosis, Lionel feels decentered, as he can understand neither his own behavior nor his triply-stigmatized existence: an orphan, a “freak”, and “half a fag” (Lethem, 2000, p. 33). Abandoned as a child, Lionel grows up in St. Vincent’s Home for Boys, a non-supportive, carceral space where boys perform the coded behaviors of presumptive masculinity. Through their association with St. Vincent’s, the residents are equally stigmatized as orphans; as Frank Minna, the small-time gangster who becomes Lionel’s pseudo-paternal figure, remarks to the future Minna Men, “Yeah, well, you’re all freaks, if you don’t mind me pointing it out” (Lethem, 2000, p. 49). While at St. Vincent’s, Lionel begins to present symptoms of Tourette’s syndrome, causing him to be further stigmatized as a “freak.” Marked as deviant for his verbal and motor tics, he attempts to pass, or to conceal his stigmatizing traits, by avoiding conversation and by rehearsing his motor tics until he can perform them in ways that he believes will be perceived as natural. These acts of repression, however, generate stronger tics that Lionel must eventually act upon. Given that dominant assumptions about disability in men result in their perceived feminization, as Garland Thomson (1997) has written, Lionel’s marginalization is compounded when he develops motor tics that compel him to touch, and sometimes kiss, the other boys at St. Vincent’s. These acts violate the code of masculine hardness that dominates carceral spaces, so Lionel is further stigmatized, later called “half a fag” by Minna for exhibiting his touching tics. Within St. Vincent’s, Lionel’s tics go unremarked by staff, and although he comprehends that his behavior is changing and is often beyond his control,

he does not know why. Without the appropriate context, Lionel grows to fear himself (Lethem, 2000).

Once Minna recruits Lionel and the other future Minna Men from St. Vincent's, Lionel enters a less-antagonistic context that allows him to tic with relative impunity, although he does not yet recognize his actions as such. As a Minna Man, Lionel's difference is seemingly integrated into his new contextualizing role, as his ticcing is reframed as an advantage. Although Minna calls Lionel a "free human freakshow" whose symptoms make him seem as though he were "shot out of a fucking cannon," Minna acknowledges that Lionel's presumed impairments can be advantages if properly contextualized (Lethem, 2000). Minna uses Lionel's ticcing to unsettle "clients and associates, ... unnerve them, disrupt some schmooze with an utterance, a head jerk, a husky, '*Eatmebailey!*'" (p. 57, emphasis in original). As a result of this inclusion, Lionel claims, "Minna had begun to draw me out. .... In this way Minna licensed my speech, and speech, it turned out, liberated me from the overflowing disaster of my Tourettic self" (p. 57). Freed from the ideology of dominant culture and immersed in the world of Court Street, Lionel feels that he has come more fully into his own.

Lionel's development in this context, however, relies in large part on others' presuppositions about a small-time mob enforcer, their lack of knowledge about Tourette's syndrome, and their perception of him as resolutely different. Minna's use of Lionel to gain advantage over clients and associates relies on Lionel's ability to upset his perceived virtual social identity (Goffman, 1990). Thus, Minna's associates anticipate the stereotypical gangster—physically imposing, stoic, and understated in a menacing way—when they encountering Lionel. Because Lionel's actual social identity departs from the clients' presumptions about him, Lionel causes anxiety.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, both Lethem and the reader are complicit in this same dynamic—Lethem seems to rely on the reader's assumptions about the conventions of representing a private detective and a thug, and he manipulates those representations by attributing Tourette's syndrome to Lionel.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, then, the recontextualization of Lionel, both in the narrative and

through the process of reading that narrative, has much to do with dominant assumptions about normalcy and stereotypes, many of which the contrasting representation inadvertently reaffirms.

Lionel's internal recontextualization results from an encounter with a medical text. Before lamming out of Brooklyn when Lionel was a teen, Minna gives Lionel a copy of *Understanding Tourette's Syndrome*. Using the book, Lionel establishes a tentative causality for his actions and recasts them (and himself) as pathological. Lionel comes to understand himself through the label of his impairment, and while this provides a temporary reprieve from his self-directed fear, the label ultimately proves insufficient as a mediator of his lived experience. In effect, Lionel establishes a medicalized narrative for his development, but because that narrative is dominated by a single (and in this case stigmatizing) trait, it cannot fully account for the multiplicity of his personality as it develops or for the various presentations of Tourette's syndrome. Like all labels, it delimits more than it signifies. Even though Lionel admits, "I realized how little context [Tourette's syndrome] was," and acknowledges the diagnosis's paucity as a signifier, he succumbs to the power of medical discourse (Lethem, 2000, p. 82). This discourse dominates his identity so thoroughly that Lionel claims, "[his] earlier, ticless self [is] impossible anymore to recall" (p. 82).

The effects of medical discourse are so pervasive that they extend beyond Lionel's own sense of self and reinscribe the world around him. The organizing power of diagnosis—"I've got Tourette's"—occasions Lionel to conceptualize New York City itself as a "Tourettic city," a concept that both alleviates and exacerbates his anxieties with respect to self-knowledge (Lethem, 2000, p. 3, 113). Lionel's equivocal usage of "Tourettic" as an adjectival descriptor of New York cannot hold, however, for outside the appropriate context—neurological medicine—the term does not signify. In this instance, Lionel's usage seems to function as a projection. Freud's concept of projection, as defined by Calvin Hall, is a psychological defense mechanism that substitutes one subject of an anxious feeling for another. In this example, Lionel's self-consciousness

about his symptoms is projected onto the city itself, thus converting an internal anxiety (“I have Tourette’s syndrome”) into an external one (“New York has Tourette’s Syndrome”) (Hall, 1979, p. 89-90). Such a conversion, Freud has contended, allows the individual to cope more easily with the anxiety.

Ironically, Lionel’s projection serves to compound his problem, not alleviate it. From its “grammar of skyscrapers and pavement” to the actions of its lottery-ticket buyers, Lionel sees New York reflect his symptoms, and these omnipresent reflections become a kind of hall of mirrors that perpetually locks him in a process of (re)becoming Tourettic. Moreover, Lethem draws our attention to Lionel’s projection, for in the paragraph following the diagnosis of New York, Lionel admits that if he “visited enough of [Minna’s] haunts before news of his death spread along Court and Smith Street, [he] might persuade [him]self against the evidence of [his] own eyes” (Lethem, 2000, p. 113). Whether Lionel thinks this self deception is positive or negative remains ambiguous, as he quickly abandons this meditation to resume the narrative of his interaction with Detective Seminole.

Lionel’s investigation into Minna’s death takes him outside New York City for the first time in his life, and robbed of the context of Court Street and the Tourettic grammar of New York when he travels to the seacoast of Maine, Lionel abandons both his projections and his dependence on the label “Tourette’s” as a defining context. The vast expanse of Atlantic Ocean—a presumably non-Tourettic geographic feature that is beyond his comprehension—nullifies his symptoms (Lethem, 2000). Standing on the rocky shore, Lionel shouts his tics into the ocean, an act that results in catharsis:

I needed to reply in some new tongue, to find a way to assert a self that had become tenuous, shrunk to a shred of Brooklyn stumbling on the coastal void: Orphan meets ocean. Jerk evaporates in salt mist.

“Freakshow!” I yelled into the swirling foam. It was lost.

“Bailey!” vanished too.

....

...Was I the first Essrog to put a footprint on the crust of Maine?

"I claim this big water for Essrog!" I shouted.

I was a *freak of nature*. (Lethem, 2000, p. 264-5)

Lionel resorts to language as he attempts to rearticulate what he sees as his rapidly dissolving self. As he assumes control of his language, Lionel is portrayed as laying claim to his identity. Freed from the grammar of New York City urban planning and culture, the verbal tics that have come unbidden throughout the text disappear into the expanse of the ocean, and Lionel represents himself as a pioneer who literally lays claim to a presumably open, undefined space. No longer an anomaly, no longer monstrous, Lionel has acknowledged himself as being "of nature," a context that, to Lionel, does not signify. This scene ultimately suggests that Lionel's difficulties with the lived experience of Tourette's syndrome are surmountable through awareness and action.

While Lionel—and presumably the reader—feels triumphant at this moment, the narrative does not end with Lionel integrated into dominant culture. In this regard, *Motherless Brooklyn* is not unlike the typical overcoming-long-odds story that tends to dominate narratives about disability, yet it does critique many long-standing assumptions. The narrative ends with Lionel emotionally alone but aware, fully embodied and accepting his condition.. In fact, Minna himself stresses that before one arrives at a final identity, one needs to endure. While still in high school, Tony Vermonte, the boy who will become the unofficial leader of the Minna Men, begins to model himself after his newest filmic anti-hero, Scarface. After Tony speaks too frankly with him, Minna tells him, "See, the thing about Scarface ... is before he got to be Scarface he was *Scabface*. Nobody ever considers that. You have to want to be Scabface first" (Lethem, 2000, p. 76-77, emphasis in original). By emphasizing the process of injury and healing that Tony Montana endures in *Scarface*, Minna suggests that part of the process of becoming necessarily involves suffering. In this respect, Lionel should *expect* to suffer, to endure pain, while he integrates his symptoms into his sense of self. In the end, what on the surface seems to be a progressive representation of a character

with Tourette 's syndrome, the representation resolves upon a reactionary, limiting convention, leaving the final impression of cognitive impairment a mixed one.

Perhaps the most limiting quality in Lethem's characterization of Lionel has nothing to do with his neurological impairment, however, but with his physicality. Despite his motor and vocal ticcing, Lionel initially seems to conform physically to normative expectations of body type—his simplified physical characterization establishes that he is large, "bearlike," and that his presence can intimidate (p. 82). Lethem, however, further characterizes Lionel with the most overdetermined difference available to a male character in contemporary American literature: a bent penis (2000, p. 221). When Lionel has sex with Kimmery, a woman he meets during his investigation, the reader first discovers that Lionel has a "huge" penis—suggesting an abundance of masculine power—but that, in Kimmery's words, it resembles "a beer can that's been crushed, like for recycling" (p. 221). Kimmery fetishizes Lionel's ticcing, imploring him to tic while she masturbates him, yet asks, "Is that normal?" (Lethem, 2000, p. 221). In response, Lionel narrates that he has "never been unveiled without hearing something about it—freak shows within freak shows" (p. 222). Lethem, by connecting Tourette 's syndrome with a sexually-charged physical stigma, affirms what Garland Thomson has called the feminizing effect of bodily difference on the perception of masculinity. As a result, Lionel's best efforts to incorporate Tourette's syndrome into his identity (and the big water that he claims for Essrog), he will always be a marked, discreditable character who remains resolutely other.

One wonders, then, why Lethem went through the trouble.

## **CONCLUSION**

*It is changes in behavior that ultimately effect changes in attitudes and beliefs. (Gartner and Joe, 1987, p. 4).*

In his landmark text *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said has revealed what he considers an institutionalized method of representation of a mythologized “East” beginning in late eighteenth century. Said has defined Orientalism as the, “corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1979). Upon its publication, Said’s book was the fuel that helped fan the early flames of postcolonial criticism into the conflagration that the discipline is today—an overwhelming number of English departments in the U.S. offer a course or courses in postcolonial literature, and students of literature understand almost implicitly that to read texts from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) to Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003) is to consider the work done in them by colonial ideologies.

In similar fashion, disability studies theorists who study literature have been laboring to promote an understanding of ableist ideology at work in texts throughout the discipline. In this vein, the enabling of literary studies requires one to read representations of physical and cognitive difference neither as signifiers of a deviant signified spirit or corporeality nor as contrasting images that promote the inherent normalcy of other, typically main, characters. Instead, to read representations of disability is to understand how those representations are both products and producers of what might be called disableism, which, through an appropriation (colonization?) of phrases from Said might be described as the “corporate institution for dealing with the” physically other,” for “dealing with” the non-normative body “by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, ... ruling over it: in short,” defining disableism as a late-capitalist “style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the” body.

Said has been criticized for what some have considered his universalizing definition, what has been considered *Orientalism*'s disconnection from historical material conditions and for its reliance on the antagonism of a mythologized "West" described not in terms of class but in terms of population. This explication of *Motherless Brooklyn* may in part be subject to the same criticism: The argument relies upon contrast with what is ostensibly an undifferentiated contemporary normative U.S. ideology of the normative body, and it does not at every opportunity endeavor to link specific methods of representation to material conditions at the time of the text's publication nor at the time of this particular reading. This lack, however, is not unintentional. While Lennard J. Davis (2002) has presciently forecast the second wave of disability studies, he has perhaps taken for granted that U.S. culture shares a similar awareness of disability-studies projects as the relatively small cohort of actual intellectuals who work in the field.

In fact, Davis has called for the first wave to be considered a neap tide much too early: aside from the committed activists who advocate disability-rights issues, many people with disabilities fail to see themselves as part of a larger political community; aside from the few literature courses that approach representations of impairment from a disability-studies perspective, most would still frame Flannery O'Connor's Hulga Hopewell as a body that signifies her moral interiority. Thus, work of the first wave—often reliant on universalizing claims such as normativity, ableism, and disabled community—still performs many necessary functions. Although vital to the future of disability studies and its intersection with the lived experience of people with disability, one cannot expect the reader to imagine the articulation of specific historical forces and attitudes that inform a characterization such as Lionel Essrog's until one is able to read him as a product of disableism in the first place. As Lionel claims, "A Touretter can also be The Invisible Man"

(Lethem, 2000, p. 44).

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<sup>1</sup> Sophocles' play *Philoctetes*, first performed in 409 BC, tells the story of Philoctetes who possessed an invincible weapon (Heracles' bow) necessary for the Achaeans in the Trojan War. On his way to fight, Philoctetes was abandoned by Odysseus on the isle of Lemnos because of a foul-smelling, chronically-painful injury on his foot.

<sup>2</sup> In the introduction to *Classic Crews: A Harry Crews Reader*, Crews has written of his experience working for a ten-in-one sideshow. Recounting his experience of waking to see the married couple of freaks, from whom he had rented a place to sleep, kiss while making breakfast, Crews has written, "I have never stopped remembering that as wondrous and special as those two people were.... He might have been any husband going to any job anywhere" (Crews, 1993, p. 13-14).

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According to Crews, the husband *might* have been any one of Crews' presumably normal readers, but that "might" implies that the husband is not in fact normal.

<sup>3</sup> Disability studies scholars carefully defend the importance of the lived experience, the material reality, of people with disabilities. Toward this end, Garland Thomson has argued for a mixed methodology of "strategic constructionism" and "strategic essentialism," while Davis, who also has acknowledged the importance of honoring lived experience, questions the legitimacy of such a polymorphous methodology in light of contemporary developments in identity politics (Garland Thomson, 1997, p. 23; Davis, 2002, p. 10-11). Garland Thomson's usage of "ethnicity" as an articulation of disparate characteristics that do not necessarily originate in the body is similar to Richard Rodriguez's usage of the term in his essay "Blaxicans' and Other Reinvented Americans." In this article, Rodriguez (2005) has argued that one can become culturally Mexican, Chinese, or any other ethnicity, simply by identifying with and adopting a conventionalized set of cultural practices and beliefs. In this respect, Garland Thomson claims that disability is a way of living, not a state of being; in fact Davis, as a person who does not claim a hearing impairment but is the son of two parents with hearing impairments, relies upon this usage when he declares himself culturally Deaf.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed examination of the role of simulacra in contemporary culture, see Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994).

<sup>5</sup> Here, Davis aligns his argument with those of Ferdinand de Saussure and similar linguists who recognize the symbiotic relationship between word and idea, signifier and signified. Davis would suggest that the notion of normalcy could not exist until the word normal, itself a sign in which many articulated signifieds are joined with one signifier, was used in this particular context. In this respect, the precession of language before idea informs the people-first language movement, despite its detractors.

<sup>6</sup> Davis connects the notion of norming, or eliminating errors from the bell curve, as the rational basis for the development of eugenics, a science that endeavors to control through the management of reproduction the hereditary qualities of a race.

<sup>7</sup> In 1842, the Flemish statistician Adolphe Quetelet articulated the concept of *l'homme moyen*, or "the average man," in his text *A Treatise on Man and the Development of His Faculties* (1969).

<sup>8</sup> Davis (1997) has shown convincingly how Galton's beliefs held considerable sway across the Atlantic, linking iconic Americans such as John D. Rockefeller President Theodore Roosevelt, H.G. Wells, and John Maynard Keynes to the American eugenicist movement and describing a Galton Society that met in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City during the early 1900's.

<sup>9</sup> Additionally, bodies with difference were prominently displayed during the final sixty years of Phase 1, a period considered to be part of the golden age of the American freak show.

<sup>10</sup> This claim is based upon the arguments of Ferdinand de Saussure (1998) who has argued that language precedes concept. Only after a signifier is created can culture endow it with significations through usage.

<sup>11</sup> Hale's new ethical theory of the novel is closely aligned with Antonio Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual. Both theories contend that an intellectual (or a literary critic, in Hale's case) has a responsibility to a general population or audience, although Gramsci's intellectual determines the material reality of the non-intellectual by "manufacturing consent," while Hale's literary critic serves as a mediator between the text (one that "calls" to the reader, invites him or her into a communion with an other) and the reader who does not know how properly to decode the linguistic signs.

<sup>12</sup> For Davis' account of the origins of the English novel, see his *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (1996).

<sup>13</sup> Adopting a pragmatic approach to the task of defining the novel, Davis (1987) has described four "novelistic conventions" he has located in disparate examples of the genre. These conventions include the use of location, characters, dialogue, and the manipulation of time, and each convention both enforces and shapes dominant ideology. An avid reader of novels himself, Davis (1987) has argued that readers must resist these ideological mechanisms, although he has admitted that an awareness of them does not render one impervious to them.

<sup>14</sup> For a comprehensive account of the ideological work of novelistic characterization, see Davis' (1987) chapter "Characters, narrators, and readers: making friends with signs" in *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction*.

<sup>15</sup> Even if one has not read Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, one is likely to recognize the name Captain Ahab and imagine him pacing across the foredeck on his ivory prosthetic. A "whale-made man," as Garland Thomson (1997) suggests, Ahab is the paradigm of the character with

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disability. His deviant corporeality functions as a symbol of his deviant morality: Ahab is willing to sacrifice the entire crew of the Pequod to exact his revenge, harpooning the ubiquitous whale that has both evaded him and disabled him.

<sup>16</sup> While Davis suggests that these representations are often “used as metaphors to represent limitations on normal morals [and] ethics,” Garland-Thomson posits that analysis of them is confined to the metaphoric or aesthetic, that often they are classified as derivations of “sentimental, romantic, Gothic, or grotesque traditions” (Davis “Normalcy” 24; Garland-Thomson *Bodies* 10).

<sup>17</sup> Contrary to Hale’s (2007) concept of the reader’s “self-binding” as a step toward alterity, traditional literary representations of disability attempt to depict the otherness of a character not to illicit identification that results in “social emotions,” but to reinforce the perceived cultural distance between the presumptively “normal” characters with whom the reader is encouraged to identify.

<sup>18</sup> For *Motherless Brooklyn*. Lethem won the 1999 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction.

<sup>19</sup> Erving Goffman has argued that individuals presuppose a stranger’s behavior and identity based upon social context, and this process of presupposition assigns a “virtual social identity” to the stranger. The social identity is considered virtual because the subject’s actual characteristics are not used in its formation. Goffman has concluded that one is stigmatized when one’s actual social identity defies the expectations of the virtual social identity (Goffman, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Goffman contends that this anxiety commonly results in stigmatization; in Lionel’s case,

however, this anxiety results in a combination of stigmatization and capitulation to Minna.

<sup>21</sup> This manipulation is likely a large cause of so many readers finding the book so “funny.”