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Reflections on Writing and Teaching Disability Autobiography

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THE STANDARD CHARGE ACTIVISTS AND SCHOLars make against disability autobiographies is that they reinforce cultural stereotypes and hinder social change. These texts, such critics argue, perpetuate the notion that disability is a personal tragedy that happens to an individual rather than a set of cultural structures and practices that affect many individuals. As a writer and reader of disability autobiography, I believe it is possible to use one's personal experiences to comment on the culture one inhabits. I do not intend here, however, to defend or condemn specific authors or works or to debate the value of these texts as a facet of a social-change movement. I offer instead an impressionistic account of a course on disability autobiography that I taught at Berkeley recently. What stands out in my memory of the course has to do less with students' responses to particular texts and more with interactions among the students or between the students and me that often seemed peripheral to the topic at hand. This is, then, an autobiographical essay, a series of vignettes and portraits, rendered in all the randomness of lived experience. But it will, I hope, raise issues that are central to disability activism and disability studies.

The class was an upper-division English course and was cross-listed for credit in the disability studies minor. The students were mostly juniors and seniors, majoring in English except for two majoring in psychology, two in political science, and one in film studies. Two or three students were minoring in disability studies. The texts I assigned were *The Story of My Life*, by Helen Keller; *Moving Violations*, by John Hockenberry; *Waist-High in the World*, by Nancy Mairs; *Past Due: A Story of Disability, Pregnancy, and Birth*, by Anne Finger; *Reflections: The Life and Writings of a Young Blind Woman in Post-revolutionary France*, by Thérèse-Adèle Husson; *The Little Locksmith*, by Katherine Butler Hathaway; *Autobiography of a Face*, by Lucy Grealy; and *Thinking in Pictures*, by Temple Grandin. I chose these books because they represented a range of time periods and of impairment categories. But, in all honesty, I chose these titles because at the time I had to submit the reading list that was to appear in the course listings, these were all books that I knew were readily available in alternative formats, specifically as books on tape produced by Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic and the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. I did this for the convenience of me

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and any students with print disabilities who might enroll. Berkeley, like other institutions, has a disabled-students program that produces alternative-format texts for students who need them. But since I was new at the university, I did not know how well the program worked. I wanted to be sure that students who needed alternative formats would be able to obtain them, on their own if they chose, even before the semester began.

I prepared for the course with an extra level of trepidation. This was my first class at the university. I had never taught any of the assigned texts or taught autobiography as a genre. In addition to these typical new-course jitters, I was having a hard time obtaining the access accommodations I had requested. Despite Berkeley's history as the birthplace—or one of the birthplaces, anyway—of the independent-living movement, I heard repeatedly that it had been a long time since the university had hired a faculty member with a disability. The system in place was equipped to handle faculty and staff members who had recently acquired disabilities but not those who had been disabled a long time and who were expert on what accommodations were necessary. After months of phone calls, e-mail messages, and visits to various offices, the access I had requested was only approved a couple of weeks before the semester started, leaving me feeling rattled and resentful.

And so the semester began. On the first day, a student used the phrase "people who suffer from disabilities." I opted not to correct or challenge him because I didn't want to begin the semester flashing the badge of the language police. I couldn't tell if any of the disabled students in the room responded to his use of *suffer*. And I sensed from his labored delivery that he was self-conscious because his professor and several of his classmates were visibly disabled. He was struggling, aware that whatever term he used might be the wrong one.

As it turned out, he was struggling with more than language. Later in the semester, he disclosed that he had been recently diagnosed with a learning disability. Also, he was a recovering alcoholic. He said he had heard that some people consider alcoholism a disability, though he was uncertain about this. Still later, during a class visit by Anne Finger, he admitted that he identified with her descriptions of hospital practices because he had once undergone reconstructive surgery after having his "face rearranged in a barroom brawl," as he put it.

Later in the first week, a student came to my office to tell me that she had a learning disability and to discuss accommodation issues. I was impressed with her poise as she delivered this information. I confess I became a bit misty-eyed with the recognition that the disability rights movement had made a measurable difference within even this student's memory. It was not so long ago that someone with her impairment would not have been admitted to an institution such as Berkeley or that someone with my impairment would not have been employed as her professor. In the rapid-fire delivery with which she brought up the subject, I heard an echo of my former student self, back in the dimly remembered past when I had similar conversations with my professors. In my day, however, these conversations had a different aim. I was there to persuade them that they should not dismiss me out of hand, that although I had a disability I could still perform up to par, and that I would not ask for or expect any sort of special treatment.

I made a comment along these lines to the student. She said that while she was an old hand at talking to her professors about her impairment, it was easier to talk to a professor with a disability who was teaching a disability-related class, implying that in other classes and with other professors, this conversation was not always so comfortable.

Perhaps things have not advanced as far as I'd like to think?

Other students with disabilities were not having as smooth an experience. A student told me that she wanted to take the class but

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was having trouble enrolling, for a reason she did not immediately disclose. One day when I asked her how the process was going, she burst into tears. Her enrollment problems stemmed from the fact that she had dropped out of school the previous semester, because of chronic depression. Apparently, the assistant dean she saw refused to grant her a medical leave, refused to discuss her situation as a disability issue, and even refused to look her in the eye. For all I know, there may have been extenuating circumstances that the student did not reveal to me. She petitioned another dean and was eventually able to enroll. Still, her unpleasant encounter with the bureaucracy resonated too closely with my own protracted effort to obtain access for me to dismiss it as a random glitch in the system.

In class, we were reading Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* as reissued by Roger Shattuck. It is an important new edition that restores material out of print for decades, but Shattuck's introduction begins this way:

> Helen was born a swan—fair-haired and fair-faced, without blemish or impediment, giving back as much joy to the world as she found in it. Then, before she learned to talk, an illness changed her into an ugly duckling. Her appearance did not substantially change. She did not become ugly. She became totally deaf and blind. That was enough to turn the swan into an uncontrollable creature who lost her world, her home, and her family to inner silence and darkness. Several years later another creature, this one half-blind, turned the ugly duckling back into a swan by holding her hand and teaching her a secret finger language. (ix)

Some students were appalled. "He calls them creatures," one said. "Sign language is not a secret," another pointed out. A third student, who referred to herself as the consummate English major, complained that "first he says one thing, then another. If you wrote something like that in an English class, the professor would be all over you." I always enjoy the image of English professors as avenging harpies, ready to eviscerate users of imprecise prose. But I was also pleased that these students, even at the beginning of the course, were able to identify the ableist attitude behind Shattuck's description. It allowed us to talk about Keller's enduring status as an icon and to examine the extent to which she promoted this thinking in her life writing.

Colleagues elsewhere had warned me that students often find John Hockenberry's *Moving Violations* off-putting for his rather aggressive style. My students found him at first a relief from Helen Keller. But in the second class they were personally affronted by his reasons for not enrolling in Berkeley in the early 1980s. He said that the campus was so accommodating to students with disabilities—he described it as merely "a sunny California sanitarium" (114)—that the education there must be substandard. This prompted me to ask what they knew about the history of the independent-living movement on the Berkeley campus. The disability studies minors provided a detailed account, but most of the class admitted they had never heard this history. Most students at Berkeley today are probably unaware of the history of the free-speech movement as well. My difficulties with obtaining accommodations and my student's dealings with the dean she perceived as unreceptive made the discussion of the independent-living movement a bit hard to take. On the one hand, I was pleased to think that students might draw some college pride from this history. On the other hand, I was all too aware of the risk that pride can turn to complacency and inaction.

At the end of our second class discussing Nancy Mairs's collection of essays *Waist-High in the World*, a student announced that he found Mairs to be nothing but a whiner. He was a student with a disability who had sought special permission to take the class because he was enrolled in another institution. He had, however, only been to class

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twice. After he made his remark, the rest of the class was utterly silent. I suspect they looked shocked, but I could not tell. When he came to class, he tended to interrupt and challenge anyone who spoke, and he often patronized the other disabled students in ways that offended everyone. He was hostile toward every text we read, particularly Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*, an account of childhood cancer and facial disfigurement that paralleled his life story. As I learned later, he was writing his own autobiography. The other students perceived him as an outsider and griped about him when he wasn't there, though, as one admitted, discussions were always rowdier when he was present.

In the next class, three students did a detailed and minute analysis of some of Mairs's arguments. In one case, they took her to task for what they thought was a dismissive attitude about people with learning disabilities. Another criticized her for disparaging the idea that many people with disabilities would not seek a cure, because they perceived their impairments as integral to their identities. I sensed that even in their criticism of Mairs they were defending her against the blanket charge that she was nothing but a whiner. They were asserting that she engaged them intellectually and emotionally, even though they could not agree with everything she wrote. They admired her, not for overcoming but for articulating complex issues that were important in their own lives.

In many ways, the most challenging text we read was Temple Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures*. She is a person with autism who earned a PhD in animal science and works as a college professor and a designer of humane slaughterhouses. One student admitted that she did not find the author very likable since Grandin was always talking about herself and boasting of her accomplishments. I pointed out that it was perhaps in the nature of autobiographers to talk about themselves and asked if Grandin was less likable than, say, John Hockenberry. This launched a lively discussion of social behavior and the extent to which it is innate or learned. A student who had never spoken in class before said that Grandin made her think about how many social practices are founded on a notion of so-called normal personality traits. Some weeks earlier, during a conference about her paper, this student had described herself as pathologically shy and tentatively suggested that being so put her at a disadvantage in a course such as mine, where class participation was evaluated for part of the grade. Her comment in class reminded me of this conversation and also of the student with the disruptive personality who had called Nancy Mairs a whiner.

Two themes recur in all these anecdotes. The first has to do with access. Throughout the semester, I was struck again and again by the constant ebb and flow of this social-change movement. On the one hand, here I was teaching a course in disability autobiography at a major research university. On the other hand, issues of access, my own and my students', kept cropping up. Access needs to be at the forefront of our consciousness and our conversation as disability scholars and advocates. It needs to be on our minds in the way we compose a reading list, the way we conduct our classes, the way we evaluate our students. Although being disability studies scholars does not make us access specialists, I believe we cannot cede responsibility for access to specialists or accept without question others' prescriptions about who needs access and what kinds of access are appropriate.

The other theme that emerges from these reflections has to do with disability identity. Anyone who teaches literature is accustomed to the ways students tend to identify with people they read about. This may be especially true when we teach autobiography, where the development of the author's identity is often central to the text. In this class, the texts we read and the interactions we had in the classroom seemed to prompt

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some students to contemplate or to embrace a disability identity for the first time. For these students, identification emerged from a new scrutiny of the world around them, including the built environment and academic and social practices. In the disability community and the culture at large, people hotly debate the definition of disability. Are such conditions as shyness, addiction, and depression legitimate disabilities? This debate can fuel a reactionary backlash in which it is argued that since everyone has a trait that can be perceived as a disability in certain contexts, we are all disabled, and therefore no measures to accommodate anyone need to be taken. Over their lifetimes, our students will witness an evolution in this debate that I can only begin to imagine. The ways that they identify these issues as relevant, even central, to their own lives or the lives of their peers will press the debate beyond the reductive binary of disabled versus nondisabled and continue to exert pressure on the barriers to inclusion. And some of them will, I hope, write their own autobiographies, to be read and discussed by the next generation.

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Writing Disabled Lives: Beyond the Singular

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I AM GOING TO BEGIN THIS TALK WITH TWO stories drawn from my life experience.

The first one occurred a number of years ago, when I was still living in Detroit and walking around supermarkets. I had just limped out of Warehouse Club, a discount supermarket where cartons are razored open to reveal their contents: ten-pound sacks of rice or half a dozen boxes of tissues shrink-wrapped together. My cart was loaded down with industrial quantities of toilet paper and breakfast cereal and canned tuna.

One of the neighborhood kids who hang around the doors asked me if I wanted help. Instead of my usual "No, thanks. I'm OK," I let him help me, partly because I was beat but also because I was doing him a good turn as much as he was doing me one.

"What happened to your leg?" he asked me as he was loading the groceries into the trunk of my Volvo.

"I had polio," I said.

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