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MAINSTREAMING DISABILITY STUDIES?

By Julia Miele Rodas

AMIDST THE CAST OF Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857) is the stunningly beautiful "Signora Madeline Vesey Neroni," who turns the heads of readers and characters alike. "It was impossible," the narrator informs us, "that either man or woman should do other than look at her" (ch. 10). Dark and mysterious, brilliant and alluring, Madeline Neroni entices the swains of Barchester to pay her court, then toys with them mercilessly and enjoys watching them writhe. The fact that she is both beautiful and without compunction may do little to set her apart from other Victorian villainesses, Trollope's Lizzie Eustace, for instance, Wilde's Mrs. Cheveley or, more infamously, Thackeray's Becky Sharpe, but while Lizzie, Mrs. Cheveley, and Becky ultimately meet with poetic justice, their fortunes descending as their ruthless self-interest becomes increasingly apparent, Madeline keeps herself carefully protected. Pristinely beautiful from first to last, La Signora Neroni guards her virtue and maintains an even temper, bemused both by those who hate her and by those who court her, ultimately returning with her family to their home in Italy, apparently unchanged by her experience in Barchester society. Madeline has a strange kind of integrity; she is a powerful figure, a force to be reckoned with, able to stand up with equal ease and self-assurance to the daunting Mrs. Proudie, the earnest Arabin, and the slick Mr. Slope.

Madeline is also a cripple. One of her legs has been badly damaged and is significantly shorter than the other. Acutely aware of her appearance, Madeline refuses to walk because she knows her gait is not comely. Instead, she arranges to be carried, when necessary, by a group of strong men, and she meets society artfully positioned on a sofa. The established matrons of Barchester, unable to intimidate Madeline – she laughs aloud at the stately self-importance of Lady De Courcy, commenting insolently, "Well, that's as good as a play" (ch. 37) – unable to control the sympathetic male response to the Signora's dangerous charms, and almost sick with grief and rage, try to find solace in Madeline's deficiencies.

> "She has only one leg," replied Mrs. Proudie.
>
> "Only one leg!" said Lady De Courcy, who felt to a certain degree dissatisfied that the signora was thus incapacitated. "Was she born so?"
>
> "Oh, no," said Mrs. Proudie – and her ladyship felt somewhat recomforted by the assurance – "she had two. But that Signor Neroni beat her, I believe, till she was obliged to have one amputated. At any rate, she entirely lost the use of it. . . . One would pity her in spite of her past bad conduct, if she now knew how to behave herself. But she does not. She is the most insolent creature I ever put my eyes on."

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> "Indeed she is," said Lady De Courcy.
>
> "And her conduct with men is so abominable that she is not fit to be admitted into any lady's drawing-room. . . . You don't know the intriguing villainy of that woman," said Mrs. Proudie. . . .
>
> "But you say she has only got one leg!"
>
> "She is as full of mischief as tho' she had ten." (ch. 37)

The conversation is revealing. Not only are Madeline's defects linked by the women discussing her – her disability and her insolence are connected implicitly to one another – but so too are Barchester's elite women upset by the apparent disconnect between their enemy's would-be disability and her unsettling power. How is it that a woman with only one leg could be so full of mischief? Indeed, Madeline might be likened to a kind of trickster figure: no one knows how many legs she has – one, or two, or ten –nor can anyone guess what the limits of her insolence might be. She is not fit to be admitted into any lady's drawing room, and yet, time and again, she is found at respectable parties, confidently placed in the drawing rooms of Barchester's elite. The difficulty and the delight of Madeline's character is exactly this: That she is not "overcoming" her disability (a conventional interpretation of the disabled figure), but rather, that she uses her disability to advantage. By choosing to *perform* the cripple, Madeline exerts considerable power and influence (she is instrumental, for instance, in bringing together Eleanor and Arabin), at the same time maintaining an astonishing capacity to discompose the likes of Mrs. Proudie and Lady De Courcy, those most seemingly able of women.

There is no doubt that Madeline is a remarkable figure and that her disability, far from functioning as a simple trope, adds to her interest and her complexity. But as an intriguing disabled character, she actually has plenty of company. In fact, the disabled figure is an astonishingly important presence in Victorian literature. Trollope has created Mary Belton of *The Belton Estate* (1866) and George Vavasor of *Can You Forgive Her?* (1863) in addition to Madeline Neroni. Gaskell gives us Mrs. Hamley of *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66). Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) includes both the "mad" Bertha and the blinded and maimed Rochester. George Eliot's Silas Marner seems to have a seizure disorder. There is Hardy's Clym Yeobright (*The Return of the Native*, 1878), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Romney (*Aurora Leigh*, 1857), Wilkie Collins's "Limping Lucy" (*The Moonstone*, 1868) and Miserrimus Dexter (*The Lady and the Law*, 1875). Dickens's work is, of course, replete with disabled figures: Tiny Tim, Silas Wegg, Jenny Wren, Quilp, Miss Mowcher – the list goes on and on. The extent of this presence in Victorian fiction may be attributed in part to the real presence of disabled people in Victorian culture. Considering the rise of industry, the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, the advent of a faster (and more dangerous?) way of life, the environmental contamination by which so many people were affected, the increase in urban populations and the resulting rise in contagious disease – the presence of disability must have been altogether familiar to our Victorian predecessors. But the presence of disability in Victorian fiction indicates more than a mere reflection of actual disabled persons in the culture. It points also to an underlying anxiety and ambivalence regarding this presence, a grappling with identity, a desire to experiment with places and roles.

In fact, the literature serves as a kind of barometer, making visible a keen social need to discover and work through the meaning and possibilities inherent in the disabled figure. Recent cultural scholarship confirms this sense. Martha Stoddard Holmes, for instance, points to Victorian Britain as "a time in which 'afflicted' and 'defective' bodies permeated

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not only the plots of popular literature and drama but also published debates about heredity, health, education, work, and welfare," observing, as well, that a "wide range of nonfictional texts . . . addressed disabled people as a newly visible group within Victorian culture" (192). In *Enforcing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis observes that

> The social process of disabling arrived with industrialization and with the set of practices and discourses that are linked to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of nationality, race, gender, criminality, sexual orientation, and so on.
>
> I begin with the rather remarkable fact that the constellation of words describing this concept "normal," "normalcy," "normality," "norm," "average," "abnormal" – all entered the European languages rather late in human history. The word "normal" as "constituting, conforming to, not deviating or differing from, the common type or standard, regular, usual" only enters the English language around 1840. (Previously, the word had meant "perpendicular"; the carpenter's square, called a "norm," provided the root meaning.) Likewise, the word "norm," in the modern sense, has only been in use since around 1855, and "normality" and "normalcy" appeared in 1849 and 1857 respectively. If the lexicographical information is relevant, it is possible to date the coming into consciousness in English of an idea of "the norm" over the period 1840–1860. (24)

Davis notes the "symbiotic relationship . . . between statistical science and eugenic concerns," pointing out that "both bring into society the concept of a norm, particularly a normal body, and thus in effect create the concept of the disabled body." He goes on to document the "burst of interest in statistics in the 1830s," attributing this activity in part to the Reform Laws that mark the official beginning of the Victorian period (13–14). Mary Klages's *Woeful Afflictions* also demonstrates "the centrality of disability in nineteenth-century sentimental discourse" and locates "the origins of the current confining representations of disability in the ideas and images of nineteenth-century Victorian culture" (Kline). Adding weight to these claims is the fact that the Victorian period also witnessed the birth of the new idea of medical "expertise." One consequence of this emergent discourse was the stricter enforcement of public "decency" laws in the 1880s and the resultant closing of many London freak shows. For the public increasingly saw those on display as medical anomalies eligible for treatment or professional study ("disabled") rather than as objects of entertainment ("freaks"). Given this history and the powerful, almost ubiquitous presence of disability in Victorian literature, it seems strange that there has been so little scholarship specifically investigating the role of disabled figures in Victorian literature and culture. Few scholars have given full consideration to the role of Madeline Neroni in *Barchester Towers* or to her greater cultural significance. As a kind of invisible presence or missing piece, she can be said to represent a much larger gap in the field of Victorian Studies. Despite the emergence of the idea of "disability" during the nineteenth century, Victorianist scholarship has typically overlooked, dismissed, or treated disabled figures in Victorian texts with scant attention.

The publication of Martha Stoddard Holmes's *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* has begun to redress this problem. Firmly located in the Victorian period, Holmes's book offers a fresh approach to the interpretation of disability in Victorian texts. *Fictions of Affliction* puts forward a series of substantive readings of disabled figures in Victorian literature and culture, including dramatic, fictional, autobiographical, and historical texts. Indebted, in part, to the work of Helena Michie and Audrey Jaffe, Holmes's book is fundamentally grounded in a study of melodrama, making a convincing claim that melodrama

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not only shaped Victorian interpretations of and reactions to the disabled body, but also "still dominates how we imagine disability" (194). *Fictions of Affliction* explores the relationship between melodrama and disability and considers the various ways in which the "emotional excess" belonging to both can be understood or interpreted, proposing that literary and nonliterary works co-exist in "an interdisciplinary, collaborative relationship" and that they share similar "melodramatic rhetorics of affliction" (30).

> In short, Victorian melodramatic literature's engagement of disability, ability, and feeling is dynamic and diverse, inviting more of the ongoing critical debates about whether melodrama is inherently conservative or subversive and demonstrating that the melodramatic mode enables both dynamics, even in the same work. (32)

Holmes introduces this idea by specifically addressing the interconnection between femininity, disability, and marriage which resides at the center of the melodramatic plot. Using *Les deux orphelines* by D'Ennery and Cormon (1874) as a foundation text, she discusses the idea of a "twin structure" "that pairs a disabled woman with a nondisabled one and gives them distinctly different physical, emotional, and marital futures," suggesting that this device enabled Victorian audiences "a way to tap into emotional excess and all its interesting possibilities, safely anchored to a few distinctive, visibly disabled female bodies" (38).

Holmes traces the development of current attitudes toward disability with chapters on early nineteenth-century theater, representations of disability and marriage, the treatment of Victorian beggars, and the constructions of auto/biographical narratives of disability, not only demonstrating the importance of melodrama in formulating affective binaries, but also, and more significantly, teasing apart the complexities of the melodramatic mode, enabling us to see past its inherent dualism to more complex and difficult implications. In fact, Holmes suggests that melodrama and, later, the fiction that melodrama both shapes and informs, serve as a kind of crucible for working out our most troublesome and ambivalent reactions to disability.

Of greatest value for the Victorianist are Holmes's intelligent, detailed, and finely nuanced textual interpretations. In readings of Wilkie Collins's *Hide and Seek* (1861) and *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), for instance, Holmes explores the ways in which Collins re-thinks and re-shapes the conventions of melodrama in his representations of disability, most "remarkably . . . creating [in Lucilla Finch] a disabled woman who not only expresses sexual passion but also survives this display of excess to reap the traditional heroine's rewards of courtship and marriage, . . . [even] becoming a biological mother" (76). In observing the startling power of Miss Finch, Holmes persuasively demonstrates that this power is bound up with, and not in spite of, her blindness.

> Her sexualized showing and forcing Pratalungo [Lucilla's companion and the narrator of the novel] to look offer a meaningful reversal of a repeated scenario in the nineteenth century and our own time in which the blind woman is the unknowing object of aggressive looking. Lucilla, shockingly, not only desires but also displays herself as a desiring subject. Her exhibitionism shifts the power relations in the typical scene of looking and desire. (86)

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Similarly, writing on Dickens's *Cricket on the Hearth* (1843), Holmes points out that the blind girl of the story, Bertha, "imagines marriage as an opportunity to emerge from the cultural role of cared-for Blind Girl . . . and into that of nurturer of an aging husband" (45). And Holmes offers a refreshing reading, too, of Tiny Tim, who,

> glad to be looked at in church on Christmas Day, thus invests pleasure both in the act of looking at disability and in the act of being looked at as a disabled figure. But the nature of the pleasure of the onlookers is not initially clear. He is a reminder not only of the Christ of miracles, but also of the pervasiveness of disability in the world they inhabit. If the pleasure is to remember Christ's power to heal bodies, that pleasure is juxtaposed to the experience of seeing someone whose body has not been healed. (97)

Holmes also offers readings of Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1839), Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), Dinah Craik's *Olive* (1850), and Charlotte Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865), considering the disabled female characters in these texts in terms of their potential fitness for marriage and procreation. *Fictions of Affliction* contextualizes these readings within a discussion of emergent eugenic discourse, demonstrating that the Victorian concern with disability "pointed not only backward, to parental transgression and defect, but even more urgently forward, to future generations" (68).

These few examples represent only a portion, of course, of what Holmes's book has to offer. And, while the literary readings are particularly apt, *Fictions of Affliction* is equally valuable in that it ranges deliberately between fictional and non-fictional texts, not only offering perspectives on Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39), and *Our Mutual Friend*, but also using these texts to set the stage for contemplating a series of contemporary nonfictional texts (including Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1861–62), all of which look at the figure of the disabled beggar. In making this connection, it is Holmes's contention that the dualistic representations of disability found in Victorian melodrama go on (though perhaps indirectly) to shape Victorian views of disabled indigence. "An emphasis on two disabled 'types' defined by their inability to work allowed nondisabled people to focus on charity and repression. . . . The representational gap between Tiny Tim and Silas Wegg supported and was underwritten by this elision" (131–32). Holmes offers further evidence of the inter-textual nature of the construction of disability in her fifth, and longest, chapter, "Melodramas of the Self," in which she presents close readings of a series of biographies and autobiographies of Victorians with disabilities, including lives of Harriet Martineau, John Kitto, Henry Fawcett, and Elizabeth Gilbert. Holmes's argument carefully details how the rhetorical structures of these life narratives are cued by the constructs arising from the melodramatic mode.

Holmes stresses the indissoluble bond between fiction and nonfiction in the ongoing construction of a rhetoric of disability; one of the most interesting and significant observations of the book is the idea that two competing tropes of disability – the excessive and the controlled, the authentic and the inauthentic, the conservative and the subversive (to suggest just a few of these possible dualisms) – may co-exist within a single rhetorical frame, creating within a group, a social code, or an individual a response to disability that may be ambivalent, confused, even tortured. Thus, Holmes indicates that melodrama (and, by extension, disability) "functions as both a social control and a potential source of power"

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(191), that it "not only has the potential to be subversive *or* conservative, but also the potential to do both at once" (192).

In addition to its core content, *Fictions of Affliction* includes a valuable appendix for which every Victorianist and every Disability Studies scholar is sure to be grateful, a compendium of disabled characters appearing in fictional texts of the long nineteenth century. While not absolutely exhaustive, the listing is both thorough and meticulously organized. Holmes concludes by extending a call for thoughtful action, urging the necessity to "keep examining the question of how and where and why we learn how to feel about disability" and asking "to what degree [we are] encouraged to be flexible to unprescribed emotions about impairment, and how much and by what means are we bound to such affective dyads as 'pity and fear"' (194–95).

Altogether, Holmes's achievement is enormous; she has written a thought-provoking, carefully constructed, painstakingly researched book which "explores rather than defines or concludes" (15). Her theoretical approach is fresh, compelling, finely balanced – as is evident in the observations on the concurrent dualism of disability; the recurring discussion of the connectedness of melodrama with other generic forms; the insistence on "the power of disability . . . to overturn and deconstruct our unexamined assumptions about all bodies and their differential social, sexual, economic, and overall cultural value" (132). Moreover, the scholarly range which Holmes here demonstrates is simply daunting. Informed by the theories of diverse sets of area studies – Disability Studies (DS), Women's Studies, Cultural Studies, Victorian Studies – and covering a broad spectrum of generic content – melodrama, narrative fiction, biography/autobiography, cultural history–*Fictions of Affliction* is masterful in its execution. But while the scope here is impressive, the book covers so much ground that it can also be a little overwhelming to read. There were moments, certainly, when I found myself asking if the author were simply trying to do too many different things.

This far-reaching and multi-faceted approach is not so much a fault of *Fictions of Affliction*, however, as it is a problem intrinsic to DS, itself a huge and unwieldy beast with boundaries so diffuse and permeable that even defining the discipline is a challenge. The inherent difficulty becomes apparent when considering the radical difference between Holmes's book and David Wright's *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum, 1847–1901*. Although both books may be considered as falling within the rubric of DS, Wright's is explicitly a work of medical and social history, relying heavily on archival material, patient records, and statistical data in an effort to come to a clearer understanding of Victorian institutional culture. By focusing intensively on the history of a single asylum and its "idiot" population, Wright is able to correct what he regards as "popular representations of the Victorian asylum . . . with [its] stereotypes of the miserly madhouse keeper or the inhumane state institutions" (197). Wright offers considerable insight into an organization with a complexly shifting history, an institution that began in a spirit of optimism and benevolence with a stated desire to educate those regarded as mentally defective. Ultimately, however, Wright acknowledges that the Earlswood mission veered, with the surrounding culture, toward an attitude of social Darwinism. Wright is careful to demonstrate, however, that despite this shift, the asylum fulfilled its stated goals, typically keeping its inmates for a five-year period of intensive education intended to help them better find a place in the society at large. Wright also offers a balanced view of the controversial John Langdon Down – the first to identify Trisomy 21, also sometimes called Down Syndrome – who served at

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and later directed the Earlswood Asylum for ten years in the mid-nineteenth century; Wright cautions his readers against the "mindless icon-toppling" that he sees as driving contemporary detractors of Down. He also gives attention to details often overlooked by those interested in institutional culture: Though we are inclined to see the asylum in starkly divided terms – inmates on one side, doctors and managers on the other – Wright asks questions about and provides data on attendants and nurses as well, concluding that though worker turnover was high, asylum attendants were far from being the "dregs" of society. Instead, he writes, "Attendants were ordinary Victorians making occupational choices between the available alternatives based on rational decision making" (117). Wright argues that "these novel institutions represented new opportunities for working-class women" and that "women and men made use of these facilities for economic opportunity and empowerment in a manner that has been little recognized" (119). *Mental Disability in Victorian England* is detailed and informative, a significant addition to the field of medical history, but it points as well to the diffuse, unbounded nature of DS. It is a book which will interest Victorianists, historians, and disability scholars, but its very focus also limits its audience, inspiring questions about the boundaries or definition of cultural scholarship.

In fact, as Wright's work exemplifies, DS began not within the humanities, but as an outgrowth of the social sciences and education, and in the areas of assistive technology and medicine. A movement distinctly political in its nature, early DS called for an end to the object-oriented approach to disability, the set of discourses that regarded disability as a disease to be cured and the disabled person as a "problem" to be solved. The rallying cry of this movement, "Nothing about us without us," points to its activist origins. Indeed, the largest and most vocal group (speaking metaphorically, of course, since disability activists "speak" in many different ways) within DS today continues to be a political one. Most visibly, activists have criticized Jerry Lewis and his management of the Muscular Dystrophy Association, protesting against its objectifying and infantilizing representations of people with disabilities; in 1988, an enormous student uprising at Gallaudet University resulted in the election of the school's first-ever deaf president; just last winter, grass-roots disability activists rallied against Clint Eastwood's Oscar-winning *Million Dollar Baby*, arguing within the mainstream press that the film functions "to imprint on us the horror of the paralyzed life" and that it "uncritically advocates euthanasia for quadriplegics" (Drake and Johnson; Davis, "Why 'Million Dollar Baby"').

Although the bulk of DS work is explicitly political in nature, it is not difficult to see how the concerns of the movement are essentially linked with theoretical issues and ideas within the humanities. For the questions of power over which disability scholars and activists argue, are rooted ultimately in issues of representation. So, while sociologists and medical historians, political scientists and engineers, physical therapists and cognitive psychologists, doctors and educators may comprise the bulk of those active in the arena of disability and its causes, it is those in the humanities who are, perhaps, best equipped to dissect and articulate the framework which underlies the representation of disability, and who are most interested in the essential relationship between the real and the fictional, between the narrative that shapes our lives and the narrative that we live.

A starting point for understanding DS in the humanities might be Douglas Baynton's comparison of theories of "gender, age, race, and other such categories" to the study of "physical difference," none of which, he argues, carries "inherent meanings. They must be

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interpreted," Baynton insists, and "cannot be apprehended apart from a culturally created web of meaning" (128). Likewise, Martha Stoddard Holmes laments the fact that disability has been insufficiently theorized by scholars in the humanities, remarking in particular that literary studies have usually treated disability "as something of a free zone, a last repository of essentialism." Like Baynton, Holmes sees Disability Studies as being fundamentally linked to the studies of race, class, and gender, and while she envisions the role of DS as expanding the larger field of identity studies, she is clear that disability is often neglected or under-theorized. "In a time of obligatory contextualization in which a responsible piece of scholarship by definition does not essentialize women, people of color, ethnic minorities, the working class, post-colonial subjects, or people who identify as queer, bisexual, or transgender, disability can be a realm where a trope is just a trope and characters have no cultural history" (11). Like Baynton's work and Holmes's, Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* presents Disability Studies as a discipline which takes its cues from other identity studies, and she urges her readers to understand disability as having meaning in a greater context. Specifically, Thomson proposes that "Disability Studies should become a universalizing discourse in the way that Sedgwick imagines gay studies and feminism to be. Disability (or gender or homosexuality)," she explains, "would then be recognized as structuring a wide range of thought, language, and perception that might not be explicitly articulated as 'disability'" (22). The call, clearly, is for more disability scholarship in the humanities, for the inclusion of disability as one of the ways that we think about the intersection of literature and culture, but the generation of this work poses a number of difficulties.

First and foremost is a problem of scale. Given the history of DS and its continuing place on the fringe, frankly, of mainstream scholarship, it is tremendously difficult to undertake research and writing which are both true to the area study and also sufficiently focused to capture the interest and attention of an audience outside the disability universe. In other words, most scholars continue to think of disability as a non-central issue, an idea apart from their primary area. Disability is still generally regarded as an isolated concern, of literary or cultural significance only insofar as it may serve as a convention or an icon of affect. It is also, quite simply, very tough to write a centered, connected book when one need serve so many masters; if, for instance, a Victorianist wished to write a book on, say, disability in Dickens, there would be the problem of contextualizing disability theory for a novice in the field of Victorian studies. Where does one begin? With a history of disability? With an overview of Erving Goffman's *Stigma* (1963), Simi Linton's *Claiming Disability* (1998), and the sociological work that began to create an awareness of disability as an identity? An explanation of the connection between Foucauldian theory and disability? Need it be a book that remains true to the activist consciousness of DS? Certainly, it must cite the works of Lennard Davis, of Rosemarie Garland Thomson, of Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell – and yet, none of these is a Victorianist. Will the context be sufficient without discussions of Robert McRuer's work on the relationship between queer/disabled identities and Houston Baker's work on disability and race? Unlike many other approaches – for example, those of Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, Bhaktin – DS has no central theory or set of theories which governs interpretation, so each disability scholar, or at least each one in the humanities, is often starting her work almost from scratch and new books which employ a DS perspective seem to need a more substantial – and often a more cumbersome – critical apparatus than most in order to set the stage for their endeavors. So, a book like Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies*, while nothing short of brilliant, is necessarily a kind of hybrid, part disability theory,

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part cultural history, part American literary study. And as such (and despite its enormous success), it enjoys a smaller circulation than it surely deserves.

But while there is starting to be a considerable library addressing the idea of disability from a humanities standpoint – Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies*, Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy*, and now David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* (2001) foremost among them – much of the scholarship in the field appears not as monograph, but in essay form. Edited by Lennard Davis, *The Disability Studies Reader* (1997) is a collection offering an excellent interdisciplinary overview of the field, including work from writers influential to the disability perspective (such as Erving Goffman, Susan Sontag, and Nancy Mairs) as well as seminal work from long-standing disability scholars (including Lennard Davis, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Harlan Lane, Harlan Hahn, Adrienne Asch, and David Mitchell), but it is not specifically geared to scholars in the humanities or in literary studies. (A second, revised edition of the *Disability Studies Reader* is currently in the works.) Two other excellent collections, acknowledging the relative paucity of disability scholarship available to those in the humanities, contain work oriented to an audience whose primary scholarly concerns are representation and interpretation. *The Body and Physical Difference* (1997), edited by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, includes essays on "The Representation of Disability in Twentieth-Century German Literature" and "Harriet Martineau, Invalidism, and Self-Representation," as well as a compelling piece on La Signora Madeline Vesey Neroni, in which Cindy LaCom argues "that [Madeline] will never have what the typical, whole/some Victorian woman . . . wants: union with a good man and a body/object that can nurture such a union and produce . . . children" (196). More recently, *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (2002), edited by Sharon Snyder, Brenda Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson, proffers selections oriented more explicitly to the needs and interests of literary scholars; the book includes essays considering works by Whitman, Twain, Dickens, Samuel Johnson, Conan Doyle, and Audre Lourde in addition to essays addressing other topics keyed to humanities interests.

These collections represent a mere fraction, however, of the essay-length work that circulates in the field. Tobin Siebers's recent *PMLA* article stands as evidence of the excellent literary DS work being done on a smaller scale. "Words Stare Like a Glass Eye" examines the relationship between visual aesthetic and narrative through the medium of visual detail and scarring. Observing that "healthy bodies in art do not have details," that "details appear as pathology in aesthetics because they discover the reliance of images on the difference of the disabled body" (1318), Siebers notes the essential connection between detail, scarring, disability, and narrative, offering an exquisite reading of Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996) to make his central point – that narrative essentially arises out of scarring and difference.

To be honest, though, some of the most provocative work in disability and literature is far less visible than Siebers's article or the essays available in collections, occurring at what might be considered the disciplinary margin: as articles for specialized journals; as presentations at MLA and other conferences; even as websites and other on-line sources like blogs, bulletin boards, and list-serves (most notably the DS-HUM list hosted by the University of Maryland and moderated by Mike Gill and Kestrell). One on-line poster observes, for instance, that "Dickens is focusing on a new problem. Who gets the care and food? The Victorian sensibility began to say only the 'productive.' While industrialism created more disabled than ever, it found them of little use and cast them away to institutions and poor houses" (Fecteau).

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For Victorianists, this diffusion of sources is exacerbated by the fact that many scholars doing disability-related work are not writing specifically from a DS perspective; rather they are thinking about freaks or fatness, consumption or madness, gout or blindness. Victorianist Gwen Hyman, for instance, told me about being approached by interested disability scholars after giving a talk on Wilkie Collins's legless Miserrimus Dexter; though Hyman's central premise had to do with the contest between decorous and indecorous behavior and its relationship to hybridity, a topic she sees as connected to industrialism and issues of class, the scholars who approached her immediately recognized the work as DS. In another article on Miserrimus Dexter, this one in a recent issue of *The Victorian Newsletter*, Mary Rosner argues that Dexter may be read in a more "playful" light, suggesting that the character, rather than serving as an ominous totem of degeneration, may serve instead to "encourage . . . multiple responses to monsters on display" (14). Peter Graham and Fritz Oelschlaeger's *Articulating the Elephant Man: Joseph Merrick and His Interpreters* is primarily interested in the meaning and importance of the Elephant Man myth for twentieth-century audiences, tracing the cultural significance of various "Elephant Man" texts – dramatic scripts and productions, histories, and auto/biographies – which, the book argues, all participate in the construction of an identity which now exists apart from the person who lived it. While this work is neither specifically Victorianist nor specifically DS, however, it is a book that offers a valuable interpretive structure for thinking about a very significant disabled Victorian, Joseph Carey Merrick. The initial chapters, in particular, on Merrick's life and on the writings of his doctor, Frederick Treves, are essential material for those doing work on the subject. For disability scholars, the social constructivist approach of *Articulating the Elephant Man* is also apt. As Graham and Oelschlaeger observe, "Becoming the Elephant Man for the freak show circuit may have started out as a modest bit of fiction making, but it proved to be a powerful figurative gesture, that survived and subsumed the man who made it" (2–3). Such a perspective adds both to our understanding of Merrick and to the idea of the freak. The point is this: There is a lot of work in the area that is difficult to define, collect, review, or measure, either because it is not covered by conventional indexes (like the MLA bibliography) or because the writer or indexer does not consider "disability" a meaningful keyword in the search.

Among those who have made a contribution to the field without necessarily classifying their work as DS are scholars like Joel Peter Eigen. A legal history which focuses on Old Bailey trials between 1843 and 1876, Eigen's *Unconscious Crime* examines the idea of "double consciousness" as it emerged in the courtroom during this time, specifically tracking "the Old Bailey's evolving response to defendants whose professed states of fractured or suspended consciousness departed significantly from traditional notions of mental impairment" (10). Using as his foundation a series of trials highlighted by the Old Bailey Sessions Papers (a set of pamphlets which provided authentic trial narratives for a popular audience), Eigen traces the patterns emerging from subtle shifts in courtroom response during the course of these trials, and his conclusion looks forward, ultimately, to legal positions on Multiple Personality Disorder in our own time. Carefully researched, convincingly argued, and punctuated by dramatic crime narratives, *Unconscious Crime* is, in many ways, a pleasure. But while it seems an excellent book of its kind, and while it does make clear that the mental status of any defendant is always a kind of construction, *Unconscious Crime* does not really tease out those threads which would have the most interesting implications for Victorianists interested in disability – questions of agency, of what constitutes the self, of the relationship between disability and criminality, or – since

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many of the trials he examines are capital cases – the possible links between disability and state-mandated death.

Other scholars address exactly those concerns which most interest those in the field, but do not necessarily regard themselves as participants in the DS endeavor. Among these is Elisabeth Gitter, who, though clearly familiar with and sympathetic to disability issues, nevertheless steers clear of language and argument that would identify her explicitly as a DS scholar. She has contributed articles on disabled characters in Dickens and on narratives of feminine helplessness and their relationship to disability, but her most significant scholarly work to date is, of course, her widely read award-winning book on Laura Bridgman and Samuel Gridley Howe. *The Imprisoned Guest* presents for the first time a complete biography of Laura Bridgman, whom Gitter identifies (in contrast with Helen Keller) as the "original deaf-blind girl." Though Bridgman is known today primarily through a chapter from Dickens's *American Notes* (1842), she was world-famous in her time, a sensation. As Gitter observes, "At the peak of Laura's popularity, in the 1840s and early '50s, thousands of sightseers flocked to see her on exhibition days at the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, and local guidebooks listed her as a major tourist attraction" (5). Relying on previously unconsidered archival material, Gitter's account of Bridgman's life and of her relationship with Howe, her teacher, mentor, and "rescuer" is eminently readable, thoroughly researched, and keenly insightful. But it is perhaps most remarkable for its perceptive treatment of Bridgman's internality; rather than concentrating primarily on the "miracle" of Bridgman's re-surfacing into human language and communication – in itself a gripping tale, but too often the only one that's told – Gitter instead traces Bridgman's slow descent from fame to oblivion and her concurrent fall from grace with Howe and her teachers. Employing text from many of Bridgman's own letters and from her journal, *The Imprisoned Guest* offers an agonizing account of Bridgman's thwarted desires (her teachers, for instance, disapproved of Bridgman's vocalizations; when she persistently refused to comply with their insistence that she remain mute, it was agreed that she could vocalize only when shut in a closet); and her ultimate isolation from the very world which had, with such fanfare, raised her out of "darkness and stillness, as profound as that of a closed tomb at midnight" (Dickens 86). Gitter's book offers a detailed, sensitive look at Bridgman, Howe, and the age that produced them as well as an indictment of the forces that use disability for their own purposes. While not written specifically from a DS standpoint, *The Imprisoned Guest* demonstrates an admirable consciousness of disability perspective, considering issues of representation and agency, of objectification and infantilization, as well as the rhetoric of redemption that is so often responsible for constructing disability. At no point, however, does Gitter gloss over the full humanity of her subject. Bridgman never becomes an object lesson; she is never reduced to a political point. Although Gitter's contextualization makes clear that the Bridgman phenomenon may only have been possible in the time and place in which she lived, Bridgman is not re-made into a mere emblem or marker of her age. Rather, against this backdrop of nineteenth-century charitable Boston society, amidst the debates over education, nature, and the human spirit, Bridgman's personhood is both fully realized and constantly borne in upon the reader, a ceaseless reminder of the intertwining of her existence as both subject and object.

Gitter's book represents the best of both worlds. Though it is clearly informed by DS work, the text never seems overpowered by this perspective. Though it is the work of a Victorianist, it will certainly maintain its interest for scholars in other disciplines. Indeed,

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because of its readability, *The Imprisoned Guest* is fully available to a lay readership, thus disseminating DS concepts across a significantly broader spectrum of the public than most work written explicitly from a DS approach.

BACK IN THE SEVENTIES, when my own formative experience of disability was hard-wiring itself into the ways I would ever after think about and look at the idea of disability, something called "mainstreaming" was all the rage. It was an exciting time in the world of pedagogy and in the lives of many people with disabilities. For the first time in more than a hundred years, American society was re-considering the possibility that it might be better off if, instead of segregating, isolating, and institutionalizing people with disabilities, it embraced a more fully integrated environment. This meant, for example, that little blind kids who had spent the early years of their school lives at someplace like the Industrial Home for the Blind (IHB) might now move on to someplace like P.S. 321 or, say, Valley Cottage Elementary School. The mainstreaming movement was also connected indissolubly with the independent living movement; so, at the same time that school children began entering integrated classrooms, previously institutionalized adults with disabilities were (re-)entering the larger community and beginning to live in increasing numbers in more "normal" domestic settings.

Times have changed, of course, as have pedagogical and political approaches, but the seventies were, for the Disability Movement, what the Sixties were for the Women's Liberation and Black Power Movements – a defining historical moment, an enduring reference point against which we continue to measure how-things-were-before compared with how-things-were-after. It is for this reason that I believe the idea of "mainstreaming," dated as it may now seem, ought to remain a significant approach both for theorizing disability and for contemplating the relationship between that which is considered disabled and that which is considered nondisabled. I believe, along with many others in my community, that films like *Million Dollar Baby* reinforce notions of disability which are profoundly damaging, but I also think such approaches are simply played out, that the rhetoric of paralysis and euthanasia simply replays in a loop without ever inviting any new thought or new discourse. Even those in my Freshman Composition classes move quickly through the available arguments on the subject. Thus it is I found myself filled with hope when I read a recent *New Yorker* profile of "Deadwood" writer David Milch, who, analyzing a scene from the 2005 season, observes: "What you see at the beginning . . . is the doctor – as modern medicine – collapsed into himself. Simply looking at the instruments of his own failure. Left alone, medicine kills. The predicate of modern medicine is 'We invalidate your humanity but we give you immortality, so you have to shut up and listen to us.' That's the bullshit that gets sold to patients" (Singer 192). It is not so much that I approve Milch's ideas here – in fact, I am unsure – as it is that I *am* unsure. His words invite a line of thought that feels comparatively fresh and they are located in a venue where the fresh thinking can be widely shared. Though I do consider myself a DS scholar, I find myself frustrated sometimes by what seem to me like the limitations of the discipline, by its insularity – ironically, by its exclusivity. Though DS is defined in large part by its interdisciplinary nature, it does not always make itself available to "mainstream" scholars nor does it always translate itself for other disciplines. It is a dicey point. After all, the birth of DS begins with a refrain that must not be ignored: "Nothing about us without us." The point of DS is disability first, an opportunity and a medium by which the subaltern may speak. At the same time, it seems that more may be accomplished when the voice of disability, or the voices

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that interrogate the constructs of disability, are mingled with and heard by a larger set of discourses.

Sarah Lawrence College

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