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Foreword: Disability, Metonymic Disruption, and the Gothic

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Foreword: Disability, Metonymic Disruption, and the Gothic

Blind. Vampire. Amputee. Zombie. These labels serve to identify and categorize the subject to whom they are applied. In some ways, they are essentializing. Each conjures up a specific image: dark glasses, fangs, prosthetic limbs, rotting flesh. These corporeal images become metonymic, standing in for the whole being to whom these attributes may be ascribed. At first glance, there seems a neat divide among them: real, lived embodiments of disability and fictional phantoms found in classics of horror; human and monster; materiality and metaphor. Representational traditions have long equated the disabled body with the monstrous body, metaphorically linking the qualities of monsters to the lived experience of disability or chronic illness: a shambling gait, pallor, missing or deformed limbs, and so on. These images often limit our perception of disability, rendering it monstrous and monolithic – a material metaphor, rather than a lived reality.

Speculative genres like science fiction, fantasy, and horror are rife with the complicated and compelling bodies the world has sometimes deemed monstrous, for, like the monster bodies to which they are linked, disabled bodies have also been made to dwell at the “gates of difference” and serve to police what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls “the borders of the possible” (7,12). Such bodies also find a comfortable, if architecturally imposing, home within the gothic tradition. The crumbling, haunted landscapes of gothic fiction often house characters who are physically disabled, chronically or mentally ill, as well as charlatans who pretend, play up, or otherwise perform these states of being for personal gain. Gothic spaces also house monsters. Ghosts haunt the hallways. Vampires lurk in the shadows. It can at times be difficult to tell where the material body ends and the metaphor begins, or vice versa.

As Mitchell and Snyder note in their groundbreaking work, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, disability’s centrality in the literary tradition is chiefly metaphoric, a crutch upon which systems of normalcy depend. Normalcy itself is a construct, Lennard J. Davis clarifies in *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. As industrial capitalism regulated timekeeping and mechanized labor practices, it also created a paradoxically idealized normative body based on its potential for productivity. The able body’s power – and ableism’s power – rest upon the existence of disability within a system of capitalist norms. Though later works in the realist and naturalist mode are more recognizably critical of the horrors visited upon the body by industrial capital, gothic fiction also trades in the horror of the body to unearth “what was buried beneath the façade of a supposedly ‘happy’ bourgeois capitalist

society” (McCalman 528). By examining inhospitable landscapes, illnesses, disabilities, and states between and beyond life and death, the gothic tradition shows that the dividing line between ability and disability is not always clear, nor is the distinction between what is normal and abnormal in a gothic world.

Vampire bar owners, blind survivors, amputee strippers, and cancer-stricken road warriors are only a few of the variously “othered” forms readers will encounter in this issue of *Studies in Gothic Fiction*. The writers in this collection look critically at the role of disability within the gothic tradition from classic novels to contemporary horror fiction to genre cinema. By bringing theoretical conversations within disability studies by leading scholars such as Davis, Mitchell and Snyder, Kafer, McRuer, Siebers, and more to bear on works of fiction within the gothic tradition, these essays both explicate the narrative function of disability within the gothic tradition and critique its use as material metaphor. With keen attention to genre, history, and close textual analysis, this issue offers rich critical perspectives on the centrality of the disabled body to the gothic tradition by examining the problems and pleasures of its presence.

The gothic tradition delights in the abnormal. Characters willingly adopt attitudes of “otherness” and are fascinated by social and physical difference. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has famously noted that disability is the one identity category everyone will be a part of if they live long enough, rendering disability an identity in flux. Gothic identities, likewise, are often fluid. The mutability of these two identity positions render gothic texts productive – and perilous – spaces to stage encounters with disability. Kathleen Hudson and Norma Aceves explore these concerns in their essays on classic gothic texts such as Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* and Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya*, arguing that the presence of disability within gothic stories can sometimes do more than merely reinforce the normate position, rendering disability as a desired and desiring identity. Hudson weds the historical masquerade tradition to Tobin Sieber’s concept of disability masquerade to explore the formation of a gothic identity through falsified disability status, while Aceves shows how accepting disability identity creates feminist empowerment for women within the gothic novel.

These insights on the role of disability within the creation and performance of gothic identities lay the groundwork for Evan Hayles Gledhill and Laura R. Kremmel’s essays on contemporary horror novels within the gothic tradition. Hayles Gledhill presses upon the discussions of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness within the queer disability studies

cannon to show the complex identity negotiations at play in the gothic vampire fiction of Poppy Z. Brite. Recognizing how these identities are constructed through the performance of disability and queerness utilizes the gothic identity as a site that reworks monstrosity as material metaphor. Likewise, Kremmel's reading of Josh Malerman's *Bird Box* proposes that compulsory able-bodiedness is antithetical to survival in post-apocalyptic horror fiction, where disability becomes a choice to sustain life. To recast blindness as a mechanism for survival both complicates and makes great use of the gothic tradition's emphasis on obscured vision, illustrating the centrality of disability to the gothic aesthetic.

Finally, Catherine Pugh and Dawn Stobbart discuss how such gothic aesthetics play out in contemporary genre cinema. Pugh broadly investigates the role of disability in contemporary horror cinema, specifically in the fluid relationship between amputee protagonist Cherry Darling and the horde of zombie "sickos" in Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror*. Stobbart considers the aesthetics of the gothic tradition in Australian cinema through her analysis of the *Mad Max* franchise, situating the post-apocalyptic landscape of George Miller's films as one which necessarily reconfigures ableist, capitalist notions of the body. Both writers illustrate how the apocalyptic landscapes of *Planet Terror* and *Mad Max* function as modernized versions of traditional gothic landscapes, places where the known world has been rendered strange or occluded. In these new landscapes, illness, disease, and disability become the hallmarks of survivor's bodies, linking gothic identity and the disabled body as more than material metaphor.

This collection captures a wide range of possibilities for what a gothic identity might mean – as well as what a "gothic" text can be. In doing so, it necessarily complicates how we read the function of disability within the gothic tradition. These essays posit the gothic as a space of possibility and peril, a world in which definitions are never static, and identities – and bodies – are always in flux. To view the disabled body in this context destabilizes the metonymic significations that equate dark glasses to blindness or prosthetic limbs to amputees; it likewise reworks the chain of metaphoric signifiers that link chronic illness to monstrous states like vampirism or zombification. Instead, linking gothic identity to disability identity challenges and reworks the ableist norms of "bourgeois capitalist society," asserting the power of the disabled body as a tool for survival.

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