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Review: Normativity and the Modernist Bodymind

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Normativity and the Modernist Bodymind

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Maren Tova Linett. *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature*. U of Michigan P, 2017. 257 pp. \$85.00 hardcover; \$34.95 paper.

Bodies of Modernism uses the tools of literary disability studies to interrogate the pervasive and multivalent deployment of disability within transatlantic modernist texts. Drawing on works from a range of genres and geographical settings, Linett uses careful close readings to highlight modernists' conflicted relationship to normativity and to explore what these depictions reveal about early twentieth century attitudes toward disability.

Keywords: disability studies / transatlantic modernism / normativity

Bodies of Modernism uses the tools of literary disability studies to interrogate the pervasive and multivalent deployment of disability within transatlantic modernist texts. Its strength lies in its careful close readings of a broad range of texts and genres that enable a much-needed unpacking of the tension between modernism's anti- and hyper-normative commitments. The readings are organized around forms of physical disability and highlight the ideological commitments revealed by modernists' "*imaginings* of disability's effects on the bodymind" (Linett 7, emphasis in original), an analysis extended through the book's surveys of critical accounts of these textual moments that demonstrate

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the ways such imaginings are deployed in critical discourse across the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

Bodies of Modernism is structured by the well-supported premise that modernists deployed disabled characters as a means of exploring various aspects of subjectivity. The first chapter, "Mobility and Sexuality," unpacks the eugenic baggage associating humanity with walking upright through readings of depictions of women with mobility impairments in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People," and James Joyce's "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses*. In each text, Linett argues, disability and sexuality appear to be presented as incompatible, only to end up being inextricably linked.

Chapter 2, "Blindness and Intimacy," explores the epistemologies of vision developed in the early twentieth century and argues that, moving away from associations of blindness with either ignorance or prophetic vision, H.G. Wells's "The Country of the Blind," Henry Green's *Blindness*, J.M. Synge's *The Well of the Saints*, Florence Barclay's *The Rosary*, and D.H. Lawrence's "The Blind Man" frame visual impairment as a form of potentially romantic contact between the self and other. Moving between genres and literary registers, Linett's examples demonstrate the widespread interest in rethinking conventional associations of sensory experience as well as neatly illustrating Douglas Baynton's oft-cited observation that "disability is everywhere in history, once you begin to looking for it," even if it often remains "conspicuously absent in the histories we write" (52).

Chapter 3, "Deafness, Communication, and Knowledge" traces the ways that a renewed cultural interest in sound led to what Linett describes as "negative" representations of deafness in modernist texts that are nevertheless instructive in their highlighting of broader attitudes toward language and communication (85). Whereas representations of blind characters in the period demonstrate a renewed interest in the potential of non-visual means of interaction with environments and other subjects, deafness, Linett argues, is repeatedly associated with "metaphysical loneliness and epistemological failure" in works including Eudora Welty's "The Key," Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and Elizabeth Bowen's *Eva Trout* (86). There is always a risk that in tracing these broader patterns across works that more subtle differences might be lost, but the comparative analysis here helpfully illustrates the extent to which normative verbal communication was fetishized across national and generic boundaries in the early twentieth century.

In Chapter 4, "Knowledge Redux: Sensory Disability in *Ulysses*," Linett analyses the complicated structural work that blind and deaf characters perform within the text: telegraphing Bloom's own sublimated will to not know, adding to the sense of Joyce's novel as inclusive of a broad range of human "types," and operating as foils for other characters to assert their own relation to standards of normativity. The novel resists the representational patterns Linett traces in the previous two chapters, presenting disabled characters in ways that self-consciously upend those tropes. Through such meta-commentary, the chapter suggests, the novel offers an alternative exploration of how the body shapes one's interactions and experiences.

Chapter 5, “Deformity and Modernist Form,” similarly explores the relationship between representation and structural deployments of disability within modernist texts. After tracing the eugenic associations between experimental modernist form and physical deformity, the chapter offers close readings of Olive Moore’s *Spleen*, Virginia Woolf’s *The Years*, and the “Shem the penman” section of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* that nuance facile associations between disabled bodies and experimental texts (the notion that, for instance, a breaking of poetic form simplistically captured the breaking of bodies in the *Somme*) and interrogate the relationship between ideologies of gendered normativity and the “unnatural” work of women’s writing. The book’s epilogue follows through on this idea of textual representation of disability enabling characters’ (and authors’) exploration of identity in Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning*, *Midnight*, Woolf’s *The Waves*, and Pablo Picasso’s depictions of blind figures. In these works, Linett argues, representations of disability operate as opportunities to access the desirably non-normative.

It’s this nuanced tracing of the tension between modernism’s normative and non-normative investments that make these readings so helpful in teasing out the complicated ways in which modernist writers and artists conceptualized disability (and what the implications of those imaginings were, and continue to be, for disabled people). There is a danger that when we focus exclusively on disability in terms of representation, we may inadvertently contribute to the siloing of literary disability studies by perpetuating the misconception that disability is only of relevance to literary analysis when a legibly disabled character can be located. In a narrow conception of such analysis, literary disability studies risks becoming a kind of scavenger hunt for particular kinds of characters rather than a broader consideration of how disability can open up conversations about communicative, relational, and aesthetic norms as they are engaged in all texts. What Linett does particularly well in *Bodies of Modernism* is to model how these broader conversations about bodyminds and norms can be accessed through nuanced attention to representation and analysis of what it reveals about ideologies around bodies that have too often been naturalized into invisibility.

Works Cited

- Baynton, Douglas. “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History.” *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, edited by Paul K. Longmore. New York UP, 2001, pp. 33–57.