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FIXATED ON ABILITY

Questioning Ableist Metaphors in Feminist Theories of Resistance

This essay examines the ubiquitous use of ableist metaphors in contemporary feminist discourses and outlines two particular ways in which feminist theorists use disability to locate objects of remediation: first, the construction of disability in opposition to knowledge and second, the use of disability to highlight the subtle workings of power and privilege. In addition, we critique ableist notions of mobility and movement, which are used to define and imagine liberation, resistance, and transformation. Because many rhetorical uses of disability reinscribe normative and exclusionary paradigms within otherwise liberatory feminist theories, we assert the need for new metaphors and frames of reference to more adequately theorize multiplicity and to more fully realize social transformation. Transforming the ways we use language in order to more fully realize its paradoxes and playfulness will, we argue, yield more intersectional analyses and more fruitful political coalitions.

Keywords disability studies; metaphor; rhetoric; ableism; discourse; feminist theory

Introduction

Over the last 200 years, feminists have objected to their collective political dissent and analyses being characterized as “hysterical,” “delusional,” and “mad.” They have also critiqued how individual “women who depart from the mandates of femininity” have been pathologized (Thomson, *Integrating* 8). Thus, to advocate for women’s individual and collective rights, feminists have refused the analytic equation of womanhood and disability. Of course, in many ways, parallels between womanhood and disability are not unique: ableist metaphors of insanity, illness, and debilitation have been used, conservatively, to render a wide array of change agents unintelligible, irrational, and unreasonable. An impairment or deficit model has been used by those in power to characterize marginalized groups—including slaves, women, and immigrants—as incapable of full citizenship and deserving of their disenfranchisement (Baynton).

In rejecting the characterization of womanhood as disabling, however, many feminists, then and now, paradoxically stigmatize disability as a means of asserting “women’s” subjectivity. By definitively asserting that women are *not* disabled by their sex, many feminists have simply replaced one subject-object dualism (male vs. female) with another: woman vs. disability. This perpetuates a problematic mode of

subjectification that erases women with disabilities. Moreover, such an approach also situates freedom and social mobility in opposition to the (supposedly) stuck, grounded “that’s not us” disabled figure. In addition, such false binaries obscure the multiplicity of identities and overlapping layers of experience which become overly simplified as discrete and separable,

In contrast to the political strategy of asserting collective rights by differentiating from/refusing analogies to other “others,” many political activists and theorists have purposefully created metaphoric links between themselves and other marginalized groups in order to illustrate shared experiences of oppression. In other words, feminists have also embraced analogies as rhetorically effective for revealing as relevant and as readable/understandable heretofore unacknowledged forms of oppression or aspects of lived experience. For example, both feminists and Marxists have borrowed from the experiences of slavery and from deficit models of disability to illustrate other forms of oppression. Connecting these different experiences of social stratification seems politically practical and also a form of alliance-building. However, such strategic borrowing erases the existence of slaves who are women, obliterates slavery as a key mode of production within capitalism, and erases people with disabilities as anything other than impaired/lacking. In these instances, the potential pitfalls or closures created by analogic bridging have been ignored or brushed aside in the name of utility.¹

In questioning ableist analogies, our goal is not to find the most “correct” language use, ultimate analogy, or perfect metaphor: we are *not* advocating the policing of language’s boundaries or the creation of a morally superior linguistic orthodoxy. We recognize language’s fluidity and playful potential and like Simone de Beauvoir (129), we find possibility in ambiguity—a call to continuously take up the world’s possibilities rather than a nihilism or fatalism about lived complexities.² The core problem, whether we are talking about refusing comparisons to disability or embracing them for their utility, is that most analogies to disability are often limited, careless, and overly fixed. Disability is rarely conceptualized as a constructed outcome of power, nor is it regarded as a political identity forged in and through systems of domination. In other words, the intersectionality of identities (Crenshaw) and the necessarily coalitional focus of instigating social change disappears: the presumed stasis of disability remains unchallenged in efforts to examine “women’s” social construction and social constraints. Moreover, because it only enters the discourse in its metaphoric sense or as a medical or bodily “fact,” disability is not comprehended as a lived reality or point of view, nor is it seen as an analytic category. The fact that power is itself a “human accomplishment, situated in everyday interaction” (Ng 132) gets elided as well.

Thus disability has been, implicitly and explicitly, interpreted as an entirely bodily and/or medical state of deficiency. Facile dismissals of disability as merely “bodily” or simply “medical” obscure how bodies are inculturated, phenomenological, and located. Medical-model understandings of disability also deny the myriad ways that science and medicine are “inside” culture, not pure, objective sets of practices immune from any imprint of power, culture, identity, or time/place. Ironically, by conflating disability with stigma or stuckness many feminists also construe disability in opposition to the feminist subject. In other words, disability’s facticity is presumed, its concreteness assumed: it has no meaning except as illustrative to and for others.

Given these dynamics, we find ourselves compelled to examine the ubiquitous use of ableist metaphors in contemporary feminist discourses aimed at critiquing and

transforming the status quo. We have identified several interrelated rhetorical strategies common in feminist and other liberatory theories. Perhaps the most evident use of disability can be found in the over reliance upon metaphors of madness, crippling, and more to characterize and locate objects of remediation, in this case dominant ideologies, practices, and politics. In this paper, we outline two particular ways in which feminist theorists use disability to locate objects of remediation: first, the construction of disability in opposition to knowledge and second, the use of disability to highlight the subtle workings of power and privilege. In addition, we question the use of ableist notions of mobility and movement to define and imagine liberation, resistance, and transformation.

All of these rhetorical uses of disability reinscribe normative and exclusionary paradigms within otherwise liberatory feminist theories. We assert that such normative uses of disability highlight the need for new metaphors and frames of reference to more adequately theorize multiplicity and to more fully realize social transformation.³ More importantly, we argue that transforming the ways we use language in order to more fully realize its paradoxes and playfulness will help to develop more intersectional analyses and more fruitful political coalitions that do not originate in an exclusionary subject-object or figure-ground dualism in which people with disabilities are regularly characterized as static or, conversely, romanticized and embraced for their difference. In other words, by taking a “strong” stand about ableist language use, our goal is to raise consciousness about the very limited and deterministic ways disability is characterized and put to use. However, rather than “curing” linguistic pathologies,⁴ we advocate a more complex use of language and a more multifaceted approach to politics and subjectivity.

“It’s Just a Metaphor—Right?”

Before exploring questions of disability and language use more fully, we want to clarify that we are using the terms analogy and metaphor broadly to mean ways of thinking or arguing that borrow from one set of experiences or identities to explore the characteristics of another. However, as Devon Carbado argues, such rhetorical strategies can set up a “discourse of equivalents” which often “falsely disaggregates” intersecting identities (289–90). In other words, like Iris Marion Young, we contend that “this idea of symmetry in our relation obscures the difference and particularity of the other position” (44). Borrowing from or paralleling as symmetrical different sets of experiences often entails unstated assumptions of reversibility or universality among subjects—a “circular relation [that] displaces and silences the other as she might speak in a different, incommensurable register” (Luce Irigaray in Young 44). Lorraine Code describes these ways of thinking, which seem to be avenues of connection, as “a system of metaphors” which create seamless universality by eradicating particularity and difference. In other words, bridging differences and forging collectivity often relies upon an “instituted social imaginary” comprised of a “complex of interlocking assumptions that presume universal human sameness and discount singular experience at the limits of what the society defines as thinkable” (*Rational* 272).

This rhetorical and epistemological method of bridging, which can be overt as well as implicit, can be enacted through the use of metaphor, simile, adjective, analogy, and

more. Here, we are primarily interested here in what “analogical” borrowing or bridging *violates* or does not allow, in what gets glossed over or ignored and in what gets reified by means of the analogy. As Geraldine Pratt writes, in thinking about metaphors of space and place in feminist discourse, “Metaphors are. . . representational strategies that help us to think and articulate ways of being. . . , they open up some avenues of thought and necessarily close down others” (13).

Again, by highlighting some “areas of closure” (13) that emerge in feminist theorists’ uses of disability, our goal is not curative or remedial—rather, we want a more thoughtful and varied conceptualization of disability and of intersectional politics to be put into play. In addition, because emotions are ways of knowing, we are interested in the nature and kind of emotional links created through analogy, for “our emotions reveal the moral dimensions of our relationships—in particular, . . . emotions reveal how seriously we take the concerns of others, what we take to be our responsibility for others’ plights, and the extent to which we regard others as even having points of view we need to take seriously” (Spelman, *Fruits* 99–100). Finally, we are interested in the underlying notions of understanding and perception enacted by analogizing that need to be troubled, or at the very least, revisited.

As general rhetorical and epistemological practices, analogies and metaphors are so common they often go unnoticed as if they were “dead”—seemingly without origin or history (Mairs, *The View* 215). We therefore find it necessary to begin by addressing the question, “What are some of the risks of analogy, anyway?” Ellen Samuels, for example, notes the “vexed issue of analogy. . . [which] cannot be extracted from the tangled history of the use and abuse of such identity analogies in past liberation movements” (234). Borrowing “evidence” from somebody else’s experiences of, say racism, to illuminate our own experiences of sexism or homophobia can be a form of what Spelman describes as “boomerang perception”—I take one look at another and come right back to myself (*Inessential* 12). This way of thinking about differences does not require one to depart in any way from oneself: instead, another’s difference becomes a means of shoring up the self-same. The difference in experience or corporeality becomes defined by its mirror-function.

María Lugones argues that this way of reading another and her experiences can be understood as an “arrogant” rather than “loving” and “world-traveling” form of perception (390–95). Lugones underscores that within frames of arrogant perception, her person gets turned into a tool for another’s analysis. Similarly, Paul Longmore critiques the pedagogical function and mode of address of charity telethons. Telethons display people with disabilities as “less fortunate and afflicted” and encourage the grateful and “fortunate” viewer to feel better about him/herself by acting in a benevolent way to help redeem others by means of a cure. Therefore another problem with the “boomerang” involved in analogizing is that its rhetorical and epistemological structure relies upon notions of use, of using other persons and/or their experiences.

In other words, analogy can be a means of objectifying or exploiting others. This creates and requires distance between selves and worlds even though it seems like a form of connection, of bringing differences together. Moreover, the comparative nature of analogical thinking requires that we conceptually retain each “side” of the analogy as separate and distinctly different. Thus, analogy relies on given categories of differentiation, identity, and experience, in order to work. These categories (and their distinctness or separateness, rather than their interactive, intersecting qualities)

become further naturalized with each comparative use. Our concern is that this sedimentation impedes our capacity to rethink relations between systems of domination and between self and other in more radical ways. An over-reliance on stale modes of address reifies disability as a problem/need or as a “vehicle of other people’s redemption” (Longmore), which stymies possibilities for imagining alternatives or for re-deploying disability metaphors in ironic or agential ways that disrupt simplistic equivalences between disability and social death.

In addition to the fairly abstract issue of upholding as “real” constructed categories of experience and identity, such that their nuances, contexts, and interconnected histories disappear, the other problem with analogies involves the conceptual separation required for them to work. Consider again race-sex analogies, which many have critiqued, the most infamous query perhaps being that of Sojourner Truth asking, “and ain’t I a woman?” (36) As Jean Fagan Yellin, for instance, demonstrates in her book, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture*, 19th and 20th century U.S. race-sex analogies required homogenous notions of race and of sex or gender to work, an insight also suggested by the provocative title of the book, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. Because race is understood to signify black men and gender white women, black women disappear altogether. Spelman therefore argues that analogies tend to support a dualist metaphysics in which each aspect of our identities seems like a separate “bead” in a pull-apart “pop-bead necklace” (*Inessential* 15, 136). Moreover, because race-sex analogies tend to reify “race” as non-whiteness and “gender” as non-maleness, those who live with and gain advantage from privilege remain unmarked by race and/or gender.

Thus not only do black women, for example, disappear in the context of 19th and 20th century race-sex analogies, but the intersectional nature of identity, the insidious workings of power, and the complexity of simultaneous privilege and oppression (Barbara Smith xxxii) all become impossible to consider. Within race-sex analogies, then, it becomes difficult to acknowledge the fact that we are all raced and gendered and that these are imbricated not separable identities and experiences. Of course, another dilemma with analogy stems from its reliance on duality, of two elements in comparison: the intersectional nature of *more than two* categories of identity or experience is impossible to consider. Race-sex analogies therefore tend to suppress anything that doesn’t seem to be “about” race or gender: class, sexuality, nation, disability, and more, are obscured and intersectional approaches to change are hindered by a sequential, dualist approach.

Conversely, although analogies often rely on conceptual distinctness and distance, they can also be a means of *collapsing differences* into a kind of universalized notion of oppression or experience without nuance. As in the examples of “boomerang perception” discussed above, anything distinct about the history, experience, and implications of, say slavery or disability, gets elided in the name of illustrating the “universal” or “oppression in general.” Paradoxically, analogy risks both the danger of conceptually separating and of collapsing all distance and difference (Spelman, *Fruits* 113–32). Either way, a more nuanced analysis, which accounts for intersectionality and uses a “both/and” position (Collins, *Black* 206–08) is impossible, as is any ability to recognize and challenge simultaneous privilege and oppression. Thus, coalition politics are hindered because of a lack of meaningful engagement with the complex tensions of similarity and difference, privilege and oppression.

Analogy and Empathy

Because analogies invite us to recognize connections across differences, albeit in potentially problematic and troubling ways, they often solicit, directly or obliquely, an emotional response as a means of successfully linking different experiences or contexts. Empathy and identification are usually key elements in crafting and deploying successful analogies. But, what kind of empathy and identification do analogies encourage? Are the analogies to disability that keep popping up in the midst of critical race and gender scholarship in any way redeemable? In other words, can analogy ever enact what Lorraine Code describes as “empathy at its best” (*Rhetorical* 130) or what Megan Boler describes as “testimonial” relations of reading that do not aim to comprehend “the other [only] through sympathy and fancy” (156)?

Code asserts that “empathy at its best” requires knowers to acknowledge empathy’s potential to be coercive, imperialist, and cooptive *as well as* affirmative, caring, and engaging (*Rhetorical* 130). She reminds us to preserve “ambiguity” as a site of ethics and to remember that subjectivity is a practice of “particularity,” context, and interrelation (140–141). In contrast to this best practice, empathy and identification *can* be troubling, for “the representation of one as a cosufferer obscures whatever role one plays as a perpetrator” (Spelman, *Fruits* 127). Code’s empathy, therefore, “preserves yet seeks to know” differences, “respects the boundaries between self and other,” and “does not seek to assimilate or obliterate.” Empathy’s “ambiguity is manifested in coming to terms simultaneously with the other’s likeness to oneself, and her/his irreducible strangeness, otherness” (*Rhetorical*, 141). Because language is key to crafting empathic relations, we want to retain an understanding of language as ambiguous and fruitful in its ambiguity. But, we find a consistent over-reliance on ableist notions of disability that reduce complexity, stifle nuance, and therefore prevent recognizing and engaging with the simultaneous likeness and strangeness Code describes as essential to forging alliances without obliterating differences.

Like Code, Boler is interested in forms of empathy and knowing that go beyond passive complicity with forms of domination or that collapse difference in the name of sameness or similarity. She asks, “who and what . . . benefits from the production of empathy? What kinds of spaces do [we] come to occupy. . .? . . . [T]hese ‘others’ whose lives we imagine *don’t want empathy, they want justice*” (156–157 emphasis added). Boler finds deeply problematic “the uninterrogated identification assumed by the faith in empathy [which] is founded on a binary of self/other. . . [T]his self is not required to identify with the oppressor, and not required to identify her complicity in structures of power” (160). Careless or thoughtless use of ableist discourse, therefore, is a sign of unearned able-bodied privilege or what Simi Linton describes as “normate pathology” (*Disability*).

Moreover, as Young reminds us, it is “patronizing attitudes of pity” that are frequently invoked by notions of symmetry in human relations: “when asked to put themselves in the position of a person in a wheelchair, they do not imagine the point of view of others; rather, they project onto those others their own fears and fantasies about themselves” (42). Likewise, Spelman excoriates egocentric “scavenging” of others’ suffering. She writes, “Sometimes the use of other people’s experience of

suffering to make sense of our own turns out to be a way to exploit their labor: I acknowledge your suffering only to the extent to which it promises to bring attention to my own. You sow the seeds, I pluck the fruits of sorrow" (*Fruits* 172). Boler therefore denounces what she comes to call "passive empathy" because it "produces no action towards justice but situates the powerful Western eye/I as the judging subject, never called upon to cast her gaze at her own reflection" (161).

We have taken this detour through a range of feminist theories of empathy and alliance-building because it is the necessary preservation of ambiguity and the requisite reflexivity about power relations that we find missing in many uses of disability in feminist discourse, uses that signify a "deep and seldom-challenged project of bodily conformity" (Thomson *Disability*). Moreover, neither empathy nor testimony can be assumed to be an unqualified good (Code, *Rhetorical* 126), nor can feminist theorists be assumed to be inherently free of domination and therefore exempt from a critique of ableist fantasies and unearned privileges.

The wide array of ableist references to disability is discouraging and suggests, instead, that empathy and identification often go wrong, that they can be problematic for transformative theories and practices because identification "requires an elision of material difference in favor of a fantasized similarity" (Grewal and Kaplan, 262). In other words, empathy is rarely practiced "at its best." Instead, empathy can be a means of simply "imposing meaning on someone else's existence from a position removed from it" (Code, *Rhetorical* 125). This removal absolves the knower of any need to examine or transform her own participation in unequal power relations (Boler, 163–164).

Dependence on Dis/ability

The relentless use of disability as a "repository of cultural meaning" (May & Ferri, 140) has been well documented in film (Darke; Norden; Safran); literature (Mitchell & Snyder; Thomson, *Extraordinary*); popular culture (Crutchfield; Thompson, *Integrating*); and folklore and fairytales (Franks). In these contexts, authors' and screenwriters' use of disability functions as a form of what Mitchell & Snyder call "narrative prosthesis" (15). In other words, disability serves as a "lightning rod" (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 15) or "negative signpost" (Franks, 251) in the narrative—"injecting a ready-made motive into a storyline or script" (Mitchell & Snyder, xii). Recently, Robert McRuer ("Crip Eye") highlighted this trend in his cautionary analysis of normalizing moments of "compulsory able-bodiedness" in seemingly transgressive contexts—e.g., careless statements such as "That's so Tourettes" on the television hit reality show, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.⁵

Disability also peppers our everyday discourse (Linton, *Claiming* 126). For example, our cable company tells us that its high-speed internet service is "insanely fast," our students complain by saying something is "lame," and a colleague tells us she is so busy, it's "crazy." Brenda Jo Brueggemann highlights the ubiquitous nature of ableist language by using it ironically in an all-too-rare act of playful redeployment. For example, she demonstrates how notions of *speech* undergird Enlightenment definitions of education, rhetoric and literacy to the extent that "when literacy and education became more widespread, this precept [of speech] sometimes fell on deaf ears. Literally [, . . . for] it was through and in education that deafness began to be

known as a group trait" (32). Later, in a chapter about deafness as diagnosable pathology, Brueggemann concludes, "Classification speaks volumes" (134).

A range of disabilities are employed for their "metaphoric" value. In her poem, "Tomorrow I Am Going To Re-write The English Language," Lois Keith suggests a need to replace "striving ambulist metaphors/ Of power and success" (which include standing on your own two feet, making great strides, standing up for yourself, and standing tall) with alternatives that mirror her way of being and moving through space (57–59). Likewise, Georgina Kleege provides us with a litany of common figurative uses of the word blind, including: blind faith, blind trust, blind spot, blindside, blind leading the blind, and following blindly (21–22). Nancy Mairs also highlights "the extent to which we equate physical vigor with positive moral qualities: ... [keep] 'your eyes open' (alertness); ...[stand] 'tall' (pride); ... 'see eye to eye' (accord); 'run rings around' (superiority)" (*The View* 215). Conversely, Mairs notes, "physical debility connotes vice, as in 'sit on your ass' (laziness), 'take it lying down' (weakness), 'listen with half an ear' (inattention), and get left 'without a leg to stand on' (unsound argument)" (215). In other words, when disability shows up in our everyday language it almost always signals ignorance, confusion, lack, absence, and ineptitude.

Ableist metaphors also slip into scholarly discourse as evidence of any number of negative qualities or attributes. As Lennard Davis reminds us, academics "routinely turn a 'deaf ear' [or a blind eye] or find [an argument] 'lame' or a political act 'crippling'" (87). Unfortunately, scholars within interdisciplinary areas of study, as well as those in the traditional disciplines, have been slow to recognize disability studies as a legitimate area of inquiry. This inability to analyze disability through a critical framework further demonstrates the problems with passive empathy or identification, analogic bridging, and assuming the reversibility of experiences. As Iris Marion Young reminds us, "the idea of reversing perspectives assumes that the perspectives brought to a situation are equally legitimate. Where structural social injustice exists, this may not be true" (48). Thus Davis wonders if "critics of the future will be astounded, puzzled, and disturbed" that works by some of our most known and highly regarded critical scholars "managed to steer so completely away from any discussion of disability" (87).

With Davis' question in mind, we are particularly troubled by the ubiquitous use of ableist metaphors in feminist discourses. In fact, our interest in this project grew as we noticed how frequently scholars whom we otherwise greatly admire use disability in problematic ways. It is important to note that we have focused our attention primarily on some of our most favorite contemporary scholars—those whose work we have found to be provocative, insightful, critical, and creative.⁶ In addition, we find ourselves troubled by close colleagues and friends (as well as our own oversights)—in other words, we butt up against ableist practices in feminism on a daily basis, whether through peer interaction or on the page. For example, recently one of us had to interrupt her feminist theory reading group to request that discussants please stop using blind, blindness, paralyzed, and deafness to critique the perceived deficiencies and oversights in that week's readings. The room stopped dead, she was stared at in total incomprehension, and then the group continued on without a second thought to the request or its meaning. Recently, a similar situation occurred on a feminist philosophy listserv we subscribe to. In response, Shelley Tremain requested that list participants

stop relying on ableist notions of disability as a means of critiquing homophobia and conservative backlash at the state and federal level. She wrote:

I am quite surprised that contributors to this thread have been tossing around the terms 'insane,' 'sane,' 'delusional,' [and] 'mental illness' so uncritically, carelessly, and sarcastically. . . . I wonder if any of the contributors to the thread [about Virginia outlawing same-sex marriage contracts] have a political analysis of disability, of psychiatrization, [or] of forcible confinement. . . . Should feminists begin the practice of pathologizing individuals (even if only in jest) in order to deal with social problems? (April 27, 2004 FEAST-L).

We offer these examples not as extraordinary, but as rather mundane. What they suggest is a problem of understanding. As philosopher Susan Babbitt explains, understanding frequently operates according to a binary (either something fits ready-made frames of reference or it is incommensurable, outside of logic). In situations where marginalized experience and knowledge are concerned, Babbitt therefore argues that it is often *not* a "matter of being ignored or even misunderstood" that is the core problem. Rather, it is a matter of "being understood all too well in a way that disallows recognition that there is still something that needs to be understood" (303). In other words, what is missing in much feminist discourse that seems to so easily *use* disability without a second thought as to its meaning is both a "cognitive need" and a "shifted orientation" toward experiences and knowledges that are different and that do not conform to sedimented frames of reference or epistemic models. Thus Babbitt argues for the need to develop a cognitive awareness of a *lack of understanding* (in this case, of disability as complex and as intersecting with other layers of power and identity) in order for change to be possible (311).

This lack of understanding of disability, or a presumed understanding of disability that fixes its meaning in stereotypical ways, is all too common, but we have noticed two predominant trends in feminist and critical race theorizing: the tendency to characterize disability in opposition to knowledge or insight (this characterization can be both negative/stigmatized or positive/romanticized); and the use of disability to identify and describe objects of remediation (to critique dominant ideologies which are imbued with unacknowledged power and privilege or to name and reject the effects of oppression).

Constructing Disability in Opposition to Knowledge

Surprisingly, many theorists continue to rely on disability as a metaphor for ignorance, stupidity, oversight, or general incompetence as a knower. For example, mixing metaphors of muteness and blindness to underscore exclusions in feminist thinking, Ann DuCille critiques "the silence (and the blindness) of feminism" (247). bell hooks uses ableist metaphors to highlight sexist thinking on the part of Paulo Freire. She writes: "For me this [patriarchal paradigm of liberation] is always a source of great anguish for it represents a blind spot in the vision of men [like Freire] who have profound insight" (49). Here, Freire's *blind spot* is his lack of awareness of sexism, which hooks places in opposition to his great *insight* and otherwise redeemable *vision* about the politics of race, ethnicity, and social class resistance. Of course, hooks is not alone in her use of visual metaphors for knowing or

insight. For example, we found that we, too, relied on the notion of sight to signify understanding in an earlier co-authored article on disability and film (May and Ferri 135). Yet equating visuality and knowing is not innocent—it has, of course, a history. For instance, many have argued that it is an episteme foundational to practices empire building and colonial cartography, of “looking out” over or surveying lands and their inhabitants as property to be conquered or developed (e.g., Duncan). Moreover, by reinscribing vision as knowledge (and, directly or indirectly, blindness as ignorance), visual metaphors for knowing or insight can reinforce Manichean dualisms of mind/body, I/not-I in the name of liberation politics.

Equating visual acuity with knowing is one common way to place disability in opposition to knowledge. But many others are equally as frequent, including dualisms between mental illness and rationality and/or characterizations of faulty knowledge models as “pathologies” or “illnesses.” For example, because Frederic Jameson relies heavily on ableist notions of schizophrenia and pathological illness in his critique of the postmodern subject, these ideas infiltrate Chela Sandoval’s reading and critique of Jameson. Sandoval writes that for Jameson, the “euphoria” of the postmodern subject “marks the onset of a new form of mass cultural pathology. It is ‘schizophrenic’ in nature—charged with hallucinogenic intensity” (21). Similarly, June Jordan (in Collins, *Fighting* 150) describes constructivist approaches to identity as a “delusional disease.” In asserting her own social theory, Patricia Hill Collins writes that deconstructivist theory can be “crippling” because it “runs in circles” and fosters nihilism (*Fighting* 189). Once again, disability is enlisted to represent foolishness and despair.

Similarly, Susan Stanford Friedman, in querying whether a doctoral education in an interdisciplinary field such as Women’s Studies is even viable, asserts “that way, madness lies” (318). Other scholars refer to those occupying opposing sides of theoretical or political debates as “madheads” (Jamila 390), as “crazy,” or as “wingnuts” (Bérubé). As these examples illustrate, schizophrenia and madness more generally are often placed in opposition to more reasoned approaches, arguments, or positions. Disability as a state of unknowing, or irrationality, is invoked in order to be deplored. Reading our own works, we found that Vivian discusses the “crazed” and troubled state ambiguity can elicit (May 366) and Beth discusses the “paranoia” about differential birthrates that Eugenicists tried to evoke (Ferri and Connor).

Schizophrenia can also be used rather romantically, as a potentially liberating state of mind that allows us to think beyond given categories and binaries, to free ourselves from modernist impulses of mind or from “autistic” egocentrism! As Félix Guattari writes,

“in a certain sense people who are operating on the level of social sciences or on the level of politics ought to ‘make themselves schizophrenic.’ And I’m not speaking of that illusory image of schizophrenics, caught in the grip of a repression, which would have us believe that they are ‘autistic,’ turned inward on themselves, and so forth. I mean that we should have the schizophrenic’s capacity to range across fields... of study” (Guattari, 83).

Obviously, Guattari is not alone in this rhetorical strategy. If we were to tell the “origin story” for wanting to write this paper, it would begin with a talk given by Judith Butler in New York City reflecting on the events of September 11th in which she made an

analogy between post-9/11 experiences and schizophrenia.⁷ Because she was using schizophrenia to highlight the benefits of destabilization, Butler could not fully grasp why her use of schizophrenia could be problematic.⁸ Yet the trouble with this kind of “borrowing” of disability, whether it is seemingly positive or negative, is that in these instances schizophrenia becomes, primarily, a rhetorical device. Schizophrenia as an embodied lived experience, a social and political history, an ontology with meaning in its own right, disappears. Instead, it is transformed into *an imagined state of dis/order available for using*, for deepening the audience’s understandings of *their own* (able-bodied) lives and their own modes of rationality.

Using Disability to Identify Domination and Privilege

Examples such as these, which construct disability in opposition to rationality or which romanticize disability’s differences, led us to examine further the paradoxical ways that critical race and gender scholars unconsciously reinforce normative and exclusionary paradigms. In particular, we have noticed the inexorable use of disability metaphors to identify and critique problematic ideologies, practices, and politics. For example, in hopes of changing the tenor and genre of much contemporary theory, Iris Marion Young describes the critical nature of some feminist discourse as “paralyzing” (16). Similarly, in order to assert the necessity of intersectional approaches to liberation, Martínez reminds us that sexism can “cripple political work” (147).

In other words, when questioning exclusionary, violent, or hierarchical ways of thinking and being, many feminist scholars use ableist metaphors for emphasis. This is particularly evident in feminist critiques of the insidious nature of power in which unearned or unacknowledged privileges are analogized to or equated with disability. Consider the following examples:

- Christine De Stefano argues that “mainstream postmodernist theory (Derrida, Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault) has been remarkably blind and insensitive to questions of gender in its own purportedly politicized rereading of history, politics, and culture” (in Harding 300).
- Spelman also asserts that one can be “deeply disfigured” (*Fruits* 111) by privilege.
- Norma Alarcón therefore suggests that “the Anglo-American subject of consciousness cannot come to terms with her (his) own class-biased ethnocentrism. She is blinded by her own construction not just as a woman but as an Anglo-American one” (364).
- With the aim of transforming such racist, nationalist, and presentist practices in the field of Women’s Studies, Robyn Wiegman refers to the “blind spots” of both white feminism and the disciplines (10, 40) and discusses the “paralysis” plaguing current debates about the field (4, 13).
- Similarly, Luce Irigaray (in Young 44), Kathleen Blee (177), Trinh T. Minh-ha (163), Betty Sasaki (44), Kathleen Cleaver (39), Chandra Mohanty (in Alcoff 69), and Rachel Lee (83) all critique the “blind” spots of power or the “blinding” effects of privilege on perception and understanding.
- Because power can negatively impact our perceptions, Kelly Oliver advocates what she calls “the loving eye” which is “a critical eye, always on the lookout for the blind spots that close off the possibility of response-ability and openness to otherness and difference” (20).

- Mab Segrest, in thinking about the early stages of capitalism as deeply marked by and connected to racial hierarchies, writes, “its cost I can only describe as a maniacal decimation of other peoples and resources across the globe” (246). A few pages later, Segrest adds, “the Spanish and Portuguese, like the British after them, seemed driven by a psychosis of domination” (248).
- In an effort to characterize the pervasive nature of white supremacy within U.S. society, Trina Grillo and Stephanie Wildman explain that, “like cancer, racism/white supremacy is an illness” (45), a characterization that Adrien Wing concurs with in her critique of the use of analogy in feminist discourse. Ironically, Wing writes, “Whites can use analogies to give them greater comprehension about the illness of racism, but such analogies can create the danger of false understanding” (8).

All of these rhetorical uses of disability to identify and critique systems of domination rely on concepts of disability that are negative, simplistic, and utilitarian. This precludes any possibility for recognizing complexity and nuance in people with disabilities’ phenomenological and political identities and experiences. Stereotypical notions of blindness, mental illness, and paralysis are invoked in the examples above in order to underscore the workings of privilege and power without acknowledging disability as also constructed in and through power. Not only do people with disabilities disappear: ableism as a systemic form of domination and privilege with its own ability to skew perceptions and perpetuate inequity is not even implicitly included in the analyses. Disability, in other words, is not really considered as part of an intersectional politics or a core aspect of coalition-building for change: it has pedagogical value for highlighting the negative repercussions of unearned privileges *other* than those associated with ableism.

However, feminist theorists do not only use analogies to disability to identify various unacknowledged forms of privilege and power. Many critical race-gender theorists also invoke disability to highlight the negative and destructive effects of oppression, to characterize how oppression can be internalized, and to urge others to reject given social hierarchies. For example, emphasizing the costs of a colonized imagination, Nada Elia explains, “Living at one remove from oneself is indeed a handicap” (230). Others link the destructive results of internalized racism to a “stumbling mind” (Cervantes 5) or to being “muted” and “paralyzed” (Lugones 49, 53). Gloria Anzaldúa asserts that internalized racism “mutilates and stunts your life” because your personhood is “chopped off at the knees” (*Haciendo caras* xix; *En rapport* 207). In her later work, Anzaldúa continues to use ableist notions of paralysis to characterize a “stuck” consciousness. She writes, “Coyolxauhqui’s luz pulls you from the pit of your grief. Realizing that you always use the same tactics, repeat the same behaviors in each stage, breaks your paralysis” (*Now* 253–54).

The thread of connection across these examples is of course the slippage between disability and ignorance or the assumption that to be crippled is to be unable to move or act. In all of these examples in which oppression is linked to illness and dis/ease, *the analogies position the source of disability oppression as impairment itself*. Once again, there is little to no understanding of disability as resulting from social structures and objectifying knowledge practices that create disabilities out of corporeal differences. In other words, although racism and sexism are seen as socially produced, disability remains as an absolute state, both apolitical and asocial—it is the source of its own oppression.

Autonomy and Ambulist Mobility: Rethinking Metaphors of Freedom

In addition to the use of explicitly ableist metaphors, it is equally important to think about how ableism plays out in more implicit ways. In this vein, we wonder about many of the metaphors of movement being used in contemporary discourse. Consider this query posed to incite innovative action toward a more positive future: “What . . . if we were to tap into the life force that confers upon us the right to live and work toward possibility as opposed to remaining paralyzed and dissatisfied. . .?” (Cervenak et al. 354). A life of possibility, and even the life force itself, is constructed here in opposition to “paralysis” and dissatisfaction: in other words, being moved to act and live in fulfilling ways requires a form of *movement* that is understood in ableist terms. This example is not unique, however. References to roving subjects, boundary crossers, and migrating subjects abound: is the movement invoked to signal freedom conceptualized in ways that account for or include disability? Our suspicion is that it is not. Are contemporary theorists imagining rolling down the road to freedom—or is there an assumption of marching as the authoritative sign of collective group action? What notions of motility are at use in the idea of crossing borders, leaving home, or exile? What of the ideas of unrestrained movement at work in the many references to untethered subjectivities or “figures of hybridity and excess [such as the cyborg]” (Thomson, *Integrating* 9)?

Just as whiteness frequently operates as an unstated/unmarked racial norm (in, for example, analogies between homophobia and racism (Carbado 291)), able-bodiedness continues to operate as the unstated/unnoticed bodily norm both in analogies to disability and in metaphors for freedom and agency. This dynamic obscures the fact that able-bodied people are, in fact, embodied and that disabled persons are *disenabled* by systems of power. Additionally, it denies the myriad forms of unearned able-bodied privilege accorded to non-disabled persons. The able-bodied or “ambulist” (Keith) notions of mobility and movement used to define and imagine liberation, resistance, and transformation require an unstated, but understood, notion of stasis as their figurative, disabled doppelgänger. Here, we turn again to our own writing to further illustrate our point. In our discussion of the character Nichole in Atom Egoyan’s film adaption of the novel, *The Sweet Hereafter*, we analyze Nichole’s newfound agency, which rests on her astute uses of ableism to refuse sexual exploitation by her father. Yet in our article, we problematically celebrate the scene at the close of the film when she wheels herself away from the deposition table. Ironically, in analyzing the interdependent nature of ableism and sexism, we privileged autonomy and a narrow notion of motility as signifiers of freedom and agency (May and Ferri, 145). The *motility* that is imagined, in our example and in many others, as signaling freedom, political action or movement, or agency often (directly or indirectly) constructs disability as a state of being that is dependent, relational, “stuck,” broken, and/or in need of a cure—in contrast, of course, to the critical or postmodern subject who seems unfettered, on the move, independent, and whole. Such a framework replicates a troubling figure/ground dichotomy and stymies our ability to rethink diverse modes of motility, movement, agency, freedom, and subjectivity.

Our insights here build on Biddy Martin’s critique of theories that imagine queer subjectivity and liberation in opposition to the duped and stuck femme character/body.

Martin warns against projecting fixity as a means of imagining liberation (79). She is interested in questioning the binaries of mobility versus stagnation, fluidity versus entrapment, and we think that these concerns are equally relevant to a feminist disability politics. In addition, she worries about the lure of an existence without limit, without bodies, and without psyches and asks if this imagined and seemingly seductive existence is politically, ethically, and socially desirable (70).

We, too, would like to ask if feminist scholars really want to be seduced into a future without bodies or a future that continues to malign the body, or particular bodies, as a “drag” on agency or freedom. After all, should feminist scholars swallow wholesale “the liberal ideology of autonomy and independence” (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 26)? As Iris Marion Young states, “normatively privileging independence . . . and making it a primary virtue of citizenship, implies judging a huge number of people in liberal societies as less than full citizens.” Moreover, “Holding independence as a norm not only renders dependent people and their caretakers second-class citizens, but it also tends to make them invisible . . . [,] defined outside public social relations, marginalized to a private realm beyond the interaction of free and full citizens with one another” (125). Finally, this set of norms characterizes only certain kinds of relations as dependent and prevents us from starting from holding interdependence as a norm and virtue of citizenship.

Conclusion

The bulk of our analysis illustrates Lorraine Code’s warning about “hegemonic imaginaries”—that they tend to hinder or block what she describes as “responsible” knowing, or knowing other people in ways that go beyond the parameters of the “readily thinkable,” a form of knowing that is “*more than other than a mere stretching*” of given modes of perception (*Rational* 262, 272, 265 emphasis added). We have sought to underscore some of the ways in which analogies and metaphors can reinforce exclusionary and binary ways of thinking and hinder knowing others “responsibly.” As Miranda Joseph reminds us, “Although the comparison implicit in . . . analogy . . . presumes equivalence, it actually involves the hierarchical inscription of differentiated identities. Inevitably, the use of analogy elides both internal discontinuities . . . and external connections” (273).

However, as Joseph argues, what is needed when “building political movements . . . [is] the recognition of external connections and internal incoherencies . . . not only for revealing complicity, but also for revealing opportunities” (271). This is the kind of nuance that we would like to find emphasized more often in rhetorical uses of disability—the both/and simultaneity, the ironic redeployment, and the playful positioning via language that not only allow us to come to terms with ambiguities, but to flourish by engaging with multiple structures of difference and identity simultaneously. Building coalitions and thinking intersectionally is not impossible and, in fact, is exciting and fruitful—it allows us to rethink everyday assumptions and attitudes about bodily difference in ways that do not require disability to function solely as a pedagogical tool for highlighting social problems in need of remediation and it asks us not merely to invert the negative and resort to romanticizing the difference of disability.

Thus with the goal of highlighting “external connections and internal incoherencies,” we have underscored the need to account for disability in ways that do not reinforce hegemony but, rather, help to transform it. Intersectionality demands

that we do more than merely modify our analytic or metaphoric content within set frames of analysis that contain and control complexity and ambiguity. We have therefore aimed to emphasize the urgent need for new metaphors and frames of reference to adequately theorize and realize multiplicity, to account for rather than suppress the intersection of ableism with racism and sexism, such that we shift conceptions of liberation, not merely in descriptive or additive ways, but at the levels of analysis, meaning, and subjectivity.

We have raised these critiques of ableist analogical thinking in feminist discourse because they are merited and serious. Yet, we conclude by acknowledging that analogical thought has, in the end, helped us construct our own argument about analogy and metaphor. Geraldine Pratt argues that the “utility of metaphor to some extent depends on the specific circumstances in which it is used, and there are no doubt times when a static, simplifying metaphor may be useful precisely because it obscures detail and other viewpoints for the sake of a specific political (and polemical) aim. Nevertheless, we must continually remind ourselves of what we are closing off through these strategic closures; . . . [we must] encourage this process of remembering” (26). It is important for us to recognize/remember, for example, that, in order to illustrate the dangers of figure/ground thinking, we drew connections to Biddy Martin’s work in queer theory. Or, as a means of emphasizing how analogy relies on binary oppositions to work, thereby erasing whole groups of people who straddle both ‘sides’ of the analogy, we connected to research about the exclusions of race-sex analogies. In other words, we have basically argued, “like race-sex analogies, sex-disability analogies are problematic.”

Ironically, without analogy or comparative metaphors, our own analysis would not exist, at least in its present form. So, despite its potential pitfalls, it is important to emphasize how “analogy has and can function as a powerful tool in the articulation of progressive social movements” (Joseph 273). Analogy and metaphor are necessary tools, but they are not innocent ones: they need to be used with care, “deployed strategically to direct attention to the social construction of subjectivity” (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 234), “employed [only when] *explicitly* grappling with . . . intersectional reality” (Carbado 296).

By critiquing exclusionary practices within libratory theoretical, pedagogical, or historical frames of reference, we hope to have illustrated the radical possibilities of a transformative, rather than tokenizing, methodological and rhetorical inclusion. We remain hopeful that Lorraine Code’s “empathy at its best” and Megan Boler’s “testimonial” relations are possible. We have come across a few examples in our reading. For example, Anzaldúa describes “blank spots” to describe gaps in knowledge as well as the selective reality induced by privilege (*Haciendo* xxi). Margrit Shildrick uses the term “disenabled” to discuss how systems of domination simultaneously enable some at the expense of others (116). And Nancy Mairs quips, with humorous redeployment, “as a cripple, I swagger” (*Plaintext* 9).

Rather than advocating a “cure” for wayward language use, we are suggesting the need for more nuanced uses of language and metaphor that do not characterize people with disabilities in stereotypical, one-dimensional ways. Because language does not merely reflect reality but constructs it, we must be thoughtful about the politics of our words if we want to enact the kinds of social transformation we say we do. In order to promote changed social relations, we must continue to create new ways of linking our experiences and recognizing and accepting our differences in ways that retain and encourage an ambiguous, intersubjective ethic between self and other.

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Notes

1. Further examination of a double dynamic of stigma and utility and its history is needed, but is beyond the scope of this particular paper.
2. We would like to thank Robert McRuer for his help in clarifying this point.
3. Of course, disability studies scholars are not exempt from a problematic rhetorical borrowing of or reduction of different "differences" as a means of reinforcing their analyses. Mitchell & Snyder, for example, position disability as the "bastard child of conformity" (75) and others describe people with disabilities as "shackled" by oppressive social structures (Reid and Valle). Similarly, Shildrick critiques postmodernism for its "slavish concentration on the text" and lack of interdisciplinarity (5).
4. Again, thanks to Robert McRuer for clarification on this point.
5. Typically, disability representations follow predictable tropes; the disabled character is presented as childlike or animal-like, even monstrous—either completely innocent or acting on primary drives and instincts. Or, disabled characters are portrayed as "pathetic, sinister, laughable, nonsexual. . . . They are burdens, victims, and their own worst enemies" unless, of course, they have been blessed with some compensatory talent or ability with which to redeem themselves (Franks 244–45) or if they have a non-disabled savior or guardian angel to show them the "error of their ways" or to help them accept their "unfortunate lot" in life.
6. We have chosen our examples only from scholarship published since 1990 for a few reasons: the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) was signed into law in 1990; 1991 marks the date of Crenshaw's essay about intersectionality; the infinite number of ableist analogies in feminist thought prior to this date are simply too overwhelming to address within the parameters of this paper—we only include the tip of the iceberg from 1990–2004 as it is; women's studies became more established in the academy during this time—and solidified its commitment to multiplicity and difference and yet disability remains undertheorized and misunderstood in much feminist theorizing; and disability studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field in the academy during this period.
7. Butler's speech, "Global Violence, Sexual Politics," has since been published in *Queer Ideas: The David R. Kessler Lectures in Lesbian and Gay Studies*. New York: Feminist P, 197–214.
8. Nor did Butler explain why she thought schizophrenia, per se, was necessary for her argument. Strangely, the basic notion of "using" another's set of experiences as a means of "illustrating" remained unquestioned, even though many feminist scholars have critiqued and interrupted this idea, particularly Toni Morrison, Barbara Christian, and Valerie Smith, to name a few.

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