Disability Theory
Tobin Siebers
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Chapter One

Introduction

Disability Theory pursues three interlocking agendas. First, it makes an intervention from the perspective of disability studies in some of the major debates of the last thirty years in critical and cultural theory. My objective here is to address the two audiences at this convergence point: on the one hand, to demonstrate for critical and cultural theorists how disability studies transforms their basic assumptions about identity, ideology, politics, meaning, social injustice, and the body; on the other hand, to theorize the emerging field of disability studies by putting its core issues into contact with signal thinkers in the adjacent fields of cultural studies, literary theory, queer theory, gender studies, and critical race studies. Some of these debates include the possibility of ideology critique in the wake of increasingly powerful claims for the relation between ideology and unconscious thought; the authority of psychoanalysis in critical and cultural theory; the battle over the usefulness of identity politics; the impact of social construction theories in matters of gender, sexuality, and race; the assumptions underlying body theory as a field of study; the future of minority studies and whether one should be able to study what one is; the value of personal experience for theorizing social justice; the epistemology of passing in queer theory; the future alignment of the sex/gender system; and the ongoing struggle to theorize a viable model of human rights

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for the global world. The chapters to follow depend on the content specific to these great arguments and on the theorists who have best addressed them, but the goal remains in each case to use disability as a lever to elevate debate, not only by asking how the theories of our most influential critical and cultural thinkers advance disability studies but also by asking how disability theory might require these same thinkers to revise their own claims.

Second, I offer an extended discussion of the broad means by which disability relates to representation itself. This second agenda may also be thought of as an intervention in the field of theory, although at the most general level, because the status of representation has been one of the most significant issues in critical and cultural theory since the emergence of structuralism in the 1960s. The structuralists and their heirs embrace language as the dominant model for theorizing representation, interpreting nearly all symbolic behavior in strictly linguistic terms. Two consequences of this so-called linguistic turn concern disability studies. First, because linguistic structuralism tends to view language as the agent and never the object of representation, the body, whether able or disabled, figures as a language effect rather than as a causal agent, excluding embodiment from the representational process almost entirely. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, in emblematic fashion, there is "no such thing as *the* body. There is no body" (207). *Disability Theory* echoes recent calls by Linda Martín Alcoff (2006), Donna Haraway, and N. Katherine Hayles to take the mimetic powers of embodiment seriously. Disabled bodies provide a particularly strong example of embodiment as mimesis because they resist standard ideas about the body and push back when confronted by language that would try to misrepresent their realism. Second, theorists influenced by the linguistic turn infrequently extend the theory of representation from mimesis properly speaking to political representation. This lack of flexibility has made it difficult to critique ideology within mimetic theory, to push discourse theory in the direction of a broader consideration of the real as a domain in which words and things exist in relations of verifiable reciprocity, and to account for social and political representation beyond narrow ideas of social constructionism. A focus on the disabled body encourages a more generous theory of representation that reaches from gestures and emotions to language and political representation. It also opens the possibility of classifying identity as an embod-

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ied representational category, thereby inserting the body into debates about identity politics.

Third, this book theorizes disability as a minority identity, one whose particular characteristics contribute to the advancement of minority studies in general. While seen historically as a matter for medical intervention, disability has been described more recently in disability studies as a minority identity that must be addressed not as personal misfortune or individual defect but as the product of a disabling social and built environment. Tired of discrimination and claiming disability as a positive identity, people with disabilities insist on the pertinence of disability to the human condition, on the value of disability as a form of diversity, and on the power of disability as a critical concept for thinking about human identity in general. How does disability resemble or differ from race, gender, sexuality, and class as a marker of identity? Which issues ally disability studies to other minority studies? How does the inclusion of disability change the theory of minority identity? Feminism, critical race studies, and queer theory have transformed critical and cultural theory by requiring us to account for the experiences of different identities. I believe that increased literacy about disability identity and its defining experiences will transform critical and cultural theory yet again.

Disability Identity

Disability has been a medical matter for as long as human beings have sought to escape the stigma of death, disease, and injury. The medical model defines disability as an individual defect lodged in the person, a defect that must be cured or eliminated if the person is to achieve full capacity as a human being. The study of disability as a symbolic network is of more recent date. Unlike the medical approach, the emerging field of disability studies defines disability not as an individual defect but as the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment. Disability studies does not treat disease or disability, hoping to cure or avoid them; it studies the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression, attacking the widespread belief that having

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an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being. More specifically, disability studies names the states of social oppression unique to people with disabilities, while asserting at the same time the positive values that they may contribute to society. One of the basic claims of disability studies is that the presence of disabled people in any discussion changes not only the culture of the discussion but also the nature of the arguments used in the discussion. For example, disability studies frames the most contested arguments of our day, such as debates about abortion, assisted suicide, and genetic research, in entirely new and unfamiliar terms.

Disability is not a physical or mental defect but a cultural and minority identity. To call disability an identity is to recognize that it is not a biological or natural property but an elastic social category both subject to social control and capable of effecting social change. Nevertheless, as a marker of social identity, disability sometimes works in contradictory ways, and it is necessary to remark on these contradictions before moving forward, since they pervade many discussions in the field of disability studies. To put it simply, disability has both negative and positive usages in disability studies, and unless one remains vigilant about usage, a great deal of confusion will result. Undoubtedly, the central purpose of disability studies is to reverse the negative connotations of disability, but this pursuit tends to involve disability as an identity formation rather than as a physical or mental characteristic. Many disability theorists—and I count myself among them—would argue that disability as an identity is never negative. The use of disability to disparage a person has no place in progressive, democratic society, although it happens at present all the time. As a condition of bodies and minds, however, disability has both positive and negative valences. For example, many disabled people do not consider their disability a flaw or personal defect—and with good reason. They are comfortable with who they are, and they do not wish to be fixed or cured. But these same people may be ambivalent about acquiring other or additional disabilities. A woman proud of her deafness will not automatically court the idea of catching cancer. Nor will a man with post-polio syndrome look forward necessarily to the day when he turns in his crutches for a power chair—although he may. These ambivalent attitudes spring not only from the preference for able-bodiedness, which appears as a con-

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ceptual horizon beyond which it is difficult to think, but also from the intimate and beneficial connections between human identity and embodiment. It is a good thing to feel comfortable in one's skin, and when one does, it is not easy to imagine being different. For better or worse, disability often comes to stand for the precariousness of the human condition, for the fact that individual human beings are susceptible to change, decline over time, and die.

As a discipline, disability studies contains these contradictory usages and attitudes about disability, developing its own understanding of disability as a positive contribution to society and both critiquing and comprehending society's largely harmful views about disability. On one level, it is easy to believe that disability is only negative if one has insufficient schooling in disability studies, whereas on another level from a disability perspective, it is difficult to see disability as anything but positive. Increasingly, theorists of disability are arguing, as I will here, more nuanced and complicated positions. Susan Wendell, for example, makes the case that changes in the built environment will not improve the situation of some people with painful disabilities. The reality of certain bodies is a fact, while harsh, that must be recognized (45). If the field is to advance, disability studies needs to account for both the negative and positive valences of disability, to resist the negative by advocating the positive and to resist the positive by acknowledging the negative—while never forgetting that its reason for being is to speak about, for, and with disabled people.

The presence of disability creates a different picture of identity—one less stable than identities associated with gender, race, sexuality, nation, and class—and therefore presenting the opportunity to rethink how human identity works. I know as a white man that I will not wake up in the morning as a black woman, but I could wake up a quadriplegic, as Mark O'Brien did when he was six years old (O'Brien and Kendall 2003). Able-bodiedness is a temporary identity at best, while being human guarantees that all other identities will eventually come into contact with some form of disability identity. In fact, a number of disability theorists have made the crucial observation that disability frequently anchors the status of other identities, especially minority identities. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that "stigmatized social positions founded upon gender, class, nationality, and race have often relied upon disability to visually un-

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derscore the devaluation of marginal communities" (1997, 21). Douglas Baynton reveals that discrimination in the United States against people of color, women, and immigrants has been justified historically by representing them as disabled. These oppressed groups have gained some ground against prejudice, but when their identities are tied to disability, discrimination against them is justified anew. Disability marks the last frontier of unquestioned inferiority because the preference for able-bodiedness makes it extremely difficult to embrace disabled people and to recognize their unnecessary and violent exclusion from society.

The more we learn about disability, the more it will become apparent that it functions at this historical moment according to a symbolic mode different from other representations of minority difference. It is as if disability operates symbolically as an othering other. It represents a diacritical marker of difference that secures inferior, marginal, or minority status, while not having its presence as a marker acknowledged in the process. Rather, the minority identities that disability accents are thought pathological in their essence. Or one might say that the symbolic association with disability disables these identities, fixing firmly their negative and inferior status. What work is disability doing, without being remarked as such, in matters of sex, gender, class, nationality, and race? Why does the presence of disability make it easier to discriminate against other minority identities? In which other ways does disability inflect minority identity and vice versa? If disability serves as an unacknowledged symbol of otherness rather than as a feature of everyday life, how might an insistence on its presence and reality change our theories about identity?

My practice of reading here strives to reverse the influence of this strange symbolism by purposefully interpreting disability as itself, while attending to its value for intersecting identities. When minority identities are pathologized by association with disability, the effect is never, I claim, merely metaphorical—a simple twisting of meaning a degree or two toward pathology. The pathologization of other identities by disability is referential: it summons the historical and representational structures by which disability, sickness, and injury come to signify inferior human status. The appearance of pathology, then, requires that we focus rigorous attention not only on symbolic association with disability but on disability as a reality of the human condition.

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The Ideology of Ability

We seem caught as persons living finite lives between two sets of contradictory ideas about our status as human beings. The first contradiction targets our understanding of the body itself. On the one hand, bodies do not seem to matter to who we are. They contain or dress up the spirit, the soul, the mind, the self. I am, as Descartes explained, the thinking part. At best, the body is a vehicle, the means by which we convey who we are from place to place. At worst, the body is a fashion accessory. We are all playing at Dorian Gray, so confident that the self can be freed from the dead weight of the body, but we have forgotten somehow to read to the end of the novel. On the other hand, modern culture feels the urgent need to perfect the body. Whether medical scientists are working on a cure for the common cold or the elimination of all disease, a cure for cancer or the banishment of death, a cure for HIV/AIDS or control of the genetic code, their preposterous and yet rarely questioned goal is to give everyone a perfect body. We hardly ever consider how incongruous is this understanding of the body—that the body seems both inconsequential and perfectible.

A second but related contradiction targets the understanding of the human being in time. The briefest look at history reveals that human beings are fragile. Human life confronts the overwhelming reality of sickness, injury, disfigurement, enfeeblement, old age, and death. Natural disasters, accidents, warfare and violence, starvation, disease, and pollution of the natural environment attack human life on all fronts, and there are no survivors. This is not to say that life on this earth is wretched and happiness nonexistent. The point is simply that history reveals one unavoidable truth about human beings—whatever our destiny as a species, we are as individuals feeble and finite. And yet the vision of the future to which we often hold promises an existence that bears little or no resemblance to our history. The future obeys an entirely different imperative, one that commands our triumph over death and contradicts everything that history tells us about our lot in life. Many religions instruct that human beings will someday win eternal life. Science fiction fantasizes about aliens who have left behind their mortal sheath; they are superior to us, but we are evolving in their direction. Cybernetics treats human intelligence as software that can be moved from machine to machine. It promises a fu-

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ture where human beings might be downloaded into new hardware whenever their old hardware wears out. The reason given for exploring human cloning is to defeat disease and aging. Apparently, in some future epoch, a quick trip to the spare-parts depot will cure what ails us; people will look better, feel healthier, and live three times longer. Finally, the human genome project, like eugenics before it, places its faith in a future understanding of human genetics that will perfect human characteristics and extend human life indefinitely.

However stark these contradictions, however false in their extremes, they seem credible in relation to each other. We are capable of believing at once that the body does not matter and that it should be perfected. We believe at once that history charts the radical finitude of human life but that the future promises radical infinitude. That we embrace these contradictions without interrogating them reveals that our thinking is steeped in ideology. Ideology does not permit the thought of contradiction necessary to question it; it sutures together opposites, turning them into apparent complements of each other, smoothing over contradictions, and making almost unrecognizable any perspective that would offer a critique of it. In fact, some cultural theorists claim to believe that ideology is as impenetrable as the Freudian unconscious—that there is no outside to ideology, that it can contain any negative, and that it sprouts contradictions without suffering them (see Goodheart; Siebers 1999). I argue another position: ideology creates, by virtue of its exclusionary nature, social locations outside of itself and therefore capable of making epistemological claims about it. The arguments that follow here are based on the contention that oppressed social locations create identities and perspectives, embodiments and feelings, histories and experiences that stand outside of and offer valuable knowledge about the powerful ideologies that seem to enclose us.

This book pursues a critique of one of these powerful ideologies—one I call the ideology of ability. The ideology of ability is at its simplest the preference for able-bodiedness. At its most radical, it defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons. It affects nearly all of our judgments, definitions, and values about human beings, but because it is discriminatory and exclusionary, it creates social locations outside of and critical of its purview, most notably in this case, the perspective of disability. Disability defines the invisible center around

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which our contradictory ideology about human ability revolves. For the ideology of ability makes us fear disability, requiring that we imagine our bodies are of no consequence while dreaming at the same time that we might perfect them. It describes disability as what we flee in the past and hope to defeat in the future. Disability identity stands in uneasy relationship to the ideology of ability, presenting a critical framework that disturbs and critiques it.

One project of this book is to define the ideology of ability and to make its workings legible and familiar, despite how imbricated it may be in our thinking and practices, and despite how little we notice its patterns, authority, contradictions, and influence as a result. A second and more important project is to bring disability out of the shadow of the ideology of ability, to increase awareness about disability, and to illuminate its kinds, values, and realities. Disability creates theories of embodiment more complex than the ideology of ability allows, and these many embodiments are each crucial to the understanding of humanity and its variations, whether physical, mental, social, or historical. These two projects unfold slowly over the course of my argument for the simple reason that both involve dramatic changes in thinking. The level of literacy about disability is so low as to be nonexistent, and the ideology of ability is so much a part of every action, thought, judgment, and intention that its hold on us is difficult to root out. The sharp difference between disability and ability may be grasped superficially in the idea that disability is essentially a "medical matter," while ability concerns natural gifts, talents, intelligence, creativity, physical prowess, imagination, dedication, the eagerness to strive, including the capacity and desire to strive—in brief, the essence of the human spirit. It is easy to write a short list about disability, but the list concerning ability goes on and on, almost without end, revealing the fact that we are always dreaming about it but rarely thinking critically about why and how we are dreaming.

I resort at the outset to the modern convention of the bullet point to introduce the ideology of ability as simply as possible. The bullet points follow without the thought of being exhaustive or avoiding contradiction and without the full commentary that they deserve. Some of the bullets are intended to look like definitions; others describe ability or disability as operators; others still gather stereotypes and prejudices. The point is to begin the accumulation of ideas, narratives, myths, and stereotypes about

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disability whose theory this book seeks to advance, to provide a few small descriptions on which to build further discussion of ability as an ideology, and to start readers questioning their own feelings about ability and disability:

- Ability is the ideological baseline by which humanness is determined. The lesser the ability, the lesser the human being.
- The ideology of ability simultaneously banishes disability and turns it into a principle of exclusion.
- Ability is the supreme indicator of value when judging human actions, conditions, thoughts, goals, intentions, and desires.
- If one is able-bodied, one is not really aware of the body. One feels the body only when something goes wrong with it.
- The able body has a great capacity for self-transformation. It can be trained to do almost anything; it adjusts to new situations. The disabled body is limited in what it can do and what it can be trained to do. It experiences new situations as obstacles.
- Disability is always individual, a property of one body, not a feature common to all human beings, while ability defines a feature essential to the human species.
- Disability can be overcome through will power or acts of the imagination. It is not real but imaginary.
- "Disability's no big deal," as Mark O'Brien writes in his poem, "Walkers" (1997, 36).
- It is better to be dead than disabled.
- Nondisabled people have the right to choose when to be able-bodied. Disabled people must try to be as able-bodied as possible all the time.
- Overcoming a disability is an event to be celebrated. It is an ability in itself to be able to overcome disability.
- The value of a human life arises as a question only when a person is disabled. Disabled people are worth less than nondisabled people, and the difference is counted in dollars and cents.
- Disabilities are the gateway to special abilities. Turn disability to an advantage.
- Loss of ability translates into loss of sociability. People with disabilities are bitter, angry, self-pitying, or selfish. Because they cannot see beyond their own pain, they lose the ability to consider the feelings of other people. Disability makes narcissists of us all.

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- People who wish to identify as disabled are psychologically damaged. If they could think of themselves as able-bodied, they would be healthier and happier.

To reverse the negative connotations of disability apparent in this list, it will be necessary to claim the value and variety of disability in ways that may seem strange to readers who have little experience with disability studies. But it is vital to show to what extent the ideology of ability collapses once we "claim disability" as a positive identity (Linton). It is equally vital to understand that claiming disability, while a significant political act, is not only political but also a practice that improves quality of life for disabled people. As documented in the case of other minority identities, individuals who identify positively rather than negatively with their disability status lead more productive and happier lives. Feminism, the black and red power movements, as well as gay and disability pride—to name only a few positive identity formations—win tangible benefits for their members, freeing them not only from the violence, hatred, and prejudice directed toward them but also providing them with both shared experiences to guide life choices and a community in which to prosper.

Some readers with a heightened sense of paradox may object that claiming disability as a positive identity merely turns disability into ability and so remains within its ideological horizon. But disability identity does not flounder on this paradox. Rather, the paradox demonstrates how difficult it is to think beyond the ideological horizon of ability and how crucial it is to make the attempt. For thinking of disability as ability, we will see, changes the meaning and usage of ability.

Minority Identity as Theory

Identity is out of fashion as a category in critical and cultural theory. While it has been associated by the Right and Left with self-victimization, group think, and political correctness, these associations are not the real reason for its fall from grace. The real reason is that identity is seen as a crutch for the person who needs extra help, who is in pain, who cannot

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think independently. I use the word "crutch" on purpose because the attack on identity is best understood in the context of disability.

According to Linda Martín Alcoff's extensive and persuasive analysis in *Visible Identities,* the current rejection of identity has a particular philosophical lineage, one driven, I believe, by the ideology of ability (2006, 47–83). The line of descent begins with the Enlightenment theory of rational autonomy, which represents the inability to reason as the sign of inbuilt inferiority. Usually, the defense of reason attacked non-Europeans as intellectually defective, but because these racist theories relied on the idea of biological inferiority, they necessarily based themselves from the start on the exclusion of disability. "The norm of rational maturity," Alcoff makes clear, "required a core self stripped of its identity. Groups too immature to practice this kind of abstract thought or to transcend their ascribed cultural identities were deemed incapable of full autonomy, and their lack of maturity was often 'explained' via racist theories of the innate inferiority of non-European peoples" (2006, 22). The Enlightenment view then descends to two modern theories, each of which sees dependence on others as a form of weakness that leads to oppressive rather than cooperative behavior. The first theory belongs to Freud, for whom strong identity attachments relate to pathological psychology and figure as symptoms of ego dysfunction. In psychoanalysis, in effect, a lack lies at the heart of identity (2006, 74), and those unable to overcome this lack fall into patterns of dependence and aggression. Second, in Sartre's existential ontology, identity is alienated from the real self. Identity represents for Sartre a social role, linked to bad faith and motivated by moral failing and intellectual weakness, that tempts the self with inauthentic existence, that is, an existence insufficiently free from the influence of others (2006, 68).

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The Nation
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Show Him the Money
By Katha Pollitt

I wanted to admire *The Trouble with Diversity,* Walter Benn Michaels's much-discussed polemic against identity politics and economic inequality. Like him, I'm bothered by the extent to which

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> symbolic politics has replaced class grievances on campus, and off it too: the obsessive cultivation of one's roots, the fetishizing of difference, the nitpicky moral one-upmanship over language. Call an argument "lame" on one academic-feminist list I'm on and you'll get—still!—an electronic earful about your insensitivity to the disabled. . . .

These two strains of thinking, despite their differences, support the contemporary distrust of identity. Thus, for Michel Foucault and Judith Butler—to name two of the most influential theorists on the scene today—identity represents a "social necessity that is also a social pathology" (Alcoff 2006, 66); there supposedly exists no form of identity not linked ultimately to subjugation by others. In short, contemporary theorists banish identity when they associate it with lack, pathology, dependence, and intellectual weakness. Identity in their eyes is not merely a liability but a disability.

Notice, however, that identity is thought defective only in the case of minorities, whereas it plays no role in the critique of majority identifications, even among theorists who assail them. For example, no one attacks Americanness specifically because it is an identity. It may be criticized as an example of nationalism, but identity receives little or no mention in the critique. Identity is attacked most frequently in the analysis of minority identity—only people of color, Jews, Muslims, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, women, and people with disabilities seem to possess unhealthy identities. It is as if identity itself occupied a minority position in present critical and cultural theory—for those who reject identity appear to do so only because of its minority status, a status linked again and again to disability.

Moreover, the rejection of minority identity repeats in nearly every case the same psychological scenario. The minority identity, a product of damage inflicted systematically on a people by a dominant culture, is rearticulated by the suffering group as self-affirming, but because the identity was born of suffering, it is supposedly unable to shed its pain, and this pain soon comes to justify feelings of selfishness, resentment, bitterness, and self-pity—all of which combine to justify the oppression of other people. Thus, J. C. Lester complains that "the disabled are in danger of being changed," because of disability studies, "from the proper object of

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decent voluntary help, where there is genuine need, into a privileged and growing interest group of oppressors of more ordinary people." Nancy Fraser also points out that identity politics "encourages the reification of group identities" and promotes "conformism, intolerance, and patriarchalism" (113, 112). Even if this tired scenario were credible—and it is not because it derives from false ideas about disability—it is amazing that so-called politically minded people are worried that a few minority groups might somehow, some day, gain the power to retaliate for injustice, when the wealthy, powerful, and wicked are actively plundering the globe in every conceivable manner: the decimation of nonindustrial countries by the industrial nations, arms-trafficking, enforcement of poverty to maintain the circuit between cheap labor and robust consumerism, global warming, sexual trafficking of women, industrial pollution by the chemical and oil companies, inflation of costs for drugs necessary to fight epidemics, and the cynical failure by the wealthiest nations to feed their own poor, not to mention starving people outside their borders.

My argument here takes issue with those who believe that identity politics either springs from disability or disables people for viable political action. I offer a defense of identity politics and a counterargument to the idea, embraced by the Right and Left, that identity politics cannot be justified because it is linked to pain and suffering. The idea that suffering produces weak identities both enforces the ideology of ability and demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of disability: disability is not a pathological condition, only analyzable via individual psychology, but a social location complexly embodied. Identities, narratives, and experiences based on disability have the status of theory because they represent locations and forms of embodiment from which the dominant ideologies of society become visible and open to criticism. One of my specific tactics throughout this book is to tap this theoretical power by juxtaposing my argument with dossier entries detailing disability identities, narratives, images, and experiences. The dossier is compiled for the most part from news stories of the kind that appear in major newspapers across the country every day, although I have avoided the feel-good human-interest stories dominating the news that recount how their disabled protagonists overcome their disabilities to lead "normal" lives. Rather, the dossier tends to contain testimony about the oppression of disabled people, sometimes framed in their own language, sometimes framed in the language of their

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oppressors. At first, the dossier entries may have no particular meaning to those untutored in disability studies, but my hope is that they will grow stranger and stranger as the reader progresses, until they begin to invoke feelings of horror and disgust at the blatant and persistent prejudices directed against disabled people. The dossier represents a deliberate act of identity politics, and I offer no apology for it because identity politics remains in my view the most practical course of action by which to address social injustices against minority peoples and to apply the new ideas, narratives, and experiences discovered by them to the future of progressive, democratic society.

Identity is neither a liability nor a disability. Nor is it an ontological property or a state of being. Identity is, properly defined, an epistemological construction that contains a broad array of theories about navigating social environments. Manuel Castells calls identity a collective meaning, necessarily internalized by individuals for the purpose of social action (7), while Charles Taylor argues, "My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose" (27). Alcoff explains that "identity is not merely that which is given to an individual or group, but is also a way of inhabiting, interpreting, and working through, both collectively and individually, an objective social location and group history" (2006, 42). We do well to follow these writers and to consider identity a theory-laden construction, rather than a mere social construction, in which knowledge for social living adheres—though not always and necessarily the best knowledge. Thus, identity is not the structure that creates a person's pristine individuality or inner essence but the structure by which that person identifies and becomes identified with a set of social narratives, ideas, myths, values, and types of knowledge of varying reliability, usefulness, and verifiability. It represents the means by which the person, qua individual, comes to join a particular social body. It also represents the capacity to belong to a collective on the basis not merely of biological tendencies but symbolic ones—the very capacity that distinguishes human beings from other animals.

While all identities contain social knowledge, mainstream identities are less critical, though not less effective for being so, because they are normative. Minority identities acquire the ability to make epistemological

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claims about the society in which they hold liminal positions, owing precisely to their liminality. The early work of Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd, for example, privileges the power of the minor as critique: "The study—and production—of minority discourse requires, as an inevitable consequence of its mode of existence, the transgression of the very disciplinary boundaries by which culture appears as a sublimated form with universal validity. This makes it virtually *the* privileged domain of cultural critique" (1987b, 9). The critique offered by minority identity is necessarily historical because it relies on the temporal contingency of its marginal position. Different groups occupy minority positions at different times, but this does not mean that their social location is any less objective relative to their times. Nor does it suggest that structures of oppression differ in the case of every minority identity. If history has taught us anything, it is that those in power have the ability to manipulate the same oppressive structures, dependent upon the same prejudicial representations, for the exclusion of different groups. The experiences of contemporary minority people, once brought to light, resound backward in history, like a reverse echo effect, to comment on the experiences of past minority peoples, while at the same time these past experiences contribute, one hopes, to an accumulation of knowledge about how oppression works.

Minority identity discovers its theoretical force by representing the experiences of oppression and struggle lived by minority peoples separately but also precisely as minorities, for attention to the similarities between different minority identities exposes their relation to oppression as well as increases the chance of political solidarity. According to the definition of Gary and Rosalind Dworkin, minority identity has recognizable features that repeat across the spectrum of oppressed people. "We propose," Dworkin and Dworkin write, "that a minority group is a group characterized by four qualities: identifiability, differential power, differential and pejorative treatment, and group awareness" (17). These four features form the basis of my argument about minority identity as well, with one notable addition—that minority status also meet an ethical test judged both relative to society and universally. These features require, each one in turn, a brief discussion to grasp their collective simplicity and power and to arrive at a precise and universal definition of minority identity on which to base the elaboration of disability identity, to describe its

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relation to minority identity in general, and to defend identity politics as crucial to the future of minority peoples and their quest for social justice and inclusion.

1. Identifiability as a quality exists at the heart of identity itself because we must be able to distinguish a group before we can begin to imagine an identity. Often we conceive of identifiability as involving visible differences connected to the body, such as skin color, gender traits, gestures, affect, voice, and body shapes. These physical traits, however, are not universal with respect to different cultures, and there may be actions or cultural differences that also figure as the basis of identifiability. Note as well that identifiability exists in time, and time shifts its meaning. As a group is identified, it acquires certain representations, and the growth of representations connected to the group may then change how identifiability works. For example, the existence of a group called disabled people produces a general idea of the people in the group—although the existence of the group does not depend on every disabled person fitting into it—and it then becomes easier, first, to identify people with it and, second, to shift the meaning of the group definition. Fat people are not generally considered disabled at this moment, but there are signs that they may be in the not too distant future (Kirkland). Deaf and intersex people have resisted being described as disabled; their future relation to the identity of disabled people is not clear.

Two other obvious characteristics of identifiability need to be stressed. First, identifiability is tied powerfully to the representation of difference. In cases where an existing minority group is not easily identified and those in power want to isolate the group, techniques will be used to produce identifiability. For example, the Nazis required that Jews wear yellow armbands because they were not, despite Nazi racist mythology, identifiably different from Germans. Second, identity is social, and so is the quality of identifiability. There are many physical differences among human beings that simply do not count for identifiability. It is not the fact of physical difference that matters, then, but the representation attached to difference—what makes the difference identifiable. Representation is the difference that makes a difference. We might contend that there is no such thing as private identity in the same way that Wittgenstein claimed that private language does not exist. Identity must be representable and

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communicable to qualify as identifiable. Identity serves social purposes, and a form of identity not representable in society would be incomprehensible and ineffective for these purposes.

Of course, people may identify themselves. Especially in societies where groups are identified for differential and pejorative treatment, individuals belonging to these groups may internalize prejudices against themselves and do on their own the work of making themselves identifiable. Jim Crow laws in the American South counted on people policing themselves—not drinking at a white water fountain if they were black, for example. But the way in which individuals claim identifiability also changes as the history of the group changes. A group may be singled out for persecution, but as it grows more rebellious, it may work to preserve its identity, while transforming simultaneously the political values attached to it. The American military's policy, "Don't ask, don't tell" in the case of gay soldiers, tries to stymie the tendency of individuals to claim a positive minority identity for political reasons.

2. Differential power is a strong indicator of the difference between majority and minority identity; in fact, it may be the most important indicator because minority status relies on differential power rather than on numbers. The numerical majority is not necessarily the most powerful group. There are more women than men, and men hold more political power and have higher salaries for the same jobs. Numerical advantage is significant, but a better indicator is the presence of social power in one group over another. Dworkin and Dworkin mention the American South in the 1950s and South Africa under apartheid as good examples of differential power located in a nonnumerical majority (12). Minorities hold less power than majority groups.

3. A central question is whether the existence of differential treatment already implies pejorative treatment. Allowing that differential treatment may exist for legitimate reasons—and it is not at all certain that we should make this allowance—the addition of pejorative treatment as a quality of minority identity stresses the defining connection between oppression and minority status. Differential and pejorative treatment is what minority group members experience as a consequence of their minority position. It affects their economic standing, cultural prestige, educational opportunities, and civil rights, among other things. Discrimination as pejorative treatment often becomes the focus of identity politics, those

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concerted attempts by minorities to protest their inferior and unjust status by forming political action groups.

The emergence of identity politics, then, relies on a new epistemological claim. While it is not necessarily the case that a group will protest against discrimination, since there is a history of groups that accept inferior status and even fight to maintain it, the shift to a protest stance must involve claims different from those supporting the discriminatory behavior. A sense of inequity comes to pervade the consciousness of the minority identity, and individuals can find no reasonable justification for their differential treatment. Individuals in protest against unjust treatment begin to develop theories that oppose majority opinion not only about themselves but about the nature of the society that supports the pejorative behavior. They develop ways to represent the actions used to perpetuate the injustice against them, attacking stereotypes, use of violence and physical attack, and discrimination. Individuals begin to constitute themselves as a minority identity, moving from the form of consciousness called internal colonization to one characterized by a new group awareness.

4. Group awareness does not refer to group identifiability but to the perception of common goals pursued through cooperation, to the realization that differential and pejorative treatment is not justified by actual qualities of the minority group, and to the conviction that majority society is a disabling environment that must be transformed by recourse to social justice. In other words, awareness is not merely self-consciousness but an epistemology that adheres in group identity status. It is the identity that brings down injustice initially on the individual's head. This identity is constructed in such a way that it can be supported only by certain false claims and stereotypes. Resistance to these false claims is pursued and shared by members of the minority identity through counterarguments about, and criticism of, the existing state of knowledge. Thus, minority identity linked to group awareness achieves the status of a theoretical claim in itself, one in conflict with the mainstream and a valuable source of meaningful diversity. Opponents of identity politics often argue that identity politics preserves the identities created by oppression: these identities are born of suffering, and embracing them supposedly represents a form of self-victimization. This argument does not understand that new epistemological claims are central to identity politics. For example, societies that oppress women often assert that they are irrational, morally de-

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praved, and physically weak. The minority identity "woman," embraced by feminist identity politics, disputes these assertions and presents alternative, positive theories about women. Identity politics do not preserve the persecuted identities created by oppressors because the knowledge claims adhering in the new identities are completely different from those embraced by the persecuting groups.

Opponents of identity politics are not wrong, however, when they associate minority identity with suffering. They are wrong because they do not accept that pain and suffering may sometimes be resources for the epistemological insights of minority identity. This issue will arise whenever we consider disability identity, since it is the identity most associated with pain, and a great deal of discrimination against people with disabilities derives from the irrational fear of pain. It is not uncommon for disabled people to be told by complete strangers that they would kill themselves if they had such a disability. Doctors often withhold treatment of minor illnesses from disabled people because they believe they are better off dead—the doctors want to end the suffering of their patients, but these disabled people do not necessarily think of themselves as in pain, although they must suffer discriminatory attitudes (Gill; Longmore 149–203). Nevertheless, people with disabilities are not the only people who suffer from prejudice. The epistemological claims of minority identity in general are often based on feelings of injustice that are painful. Wounds received in physical attacks may pale against the suffering experienced in the idea that one is being attacked because one is unjustly thought inferior—and yet suffering may have theoretical value for the person in pain. While there is a long history of describing pain and suffering as leading to egotism and narcissism—a metapsychology that plays, I argue in chapter 2, an ancillary role in the evolution of the ideology of ability—we might consider that the strong focus given to the self in pain has epistemological value.[1] Suffering is a signal to the self at risk, and this signal applies equally to physical and social situations. The body signals with pain when a person is engaged in an activity that may do that person physical harm. Similarly, consciousness feels pain when the individual is in social danger. Suffering has a theoretical component because it draws attention to situations that jeopardize the future of the individual, and when individuals who suffer from oppression gather together to share

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their experiences, this theoretical component may be directed toward political ends.

By suggesting that suffering is theory-laden—that is, a sensation evaluative of states of reality—I am trying to track how and why minority identity makes epistemological claims about society. All identity is social theory. Identities are the theories that we use to fit into and travel through the social world. Our identities have a content that makes knowledge claims about the society in which they have evolved, and we adjust our identities, when we can, to different situations to improve our chances of success. But because mainstream identities so robustly mimic existing social norms, it is difficult to abstract their claims about society. Identities in conflict with society, however, have the ability to expose its norms. Minority identity gains the status of social critique once its content has been sufficiently developed by groups that unite to protest their unjust treatment by the society in which they live.

5. In addition to the four qualities proposed by Dworkin and Dworkin, groups claiming minority identity need to meet an ethical test. Minority identities make epistemological claims about the societies in which they hold liminal positions, but not all theories are equal in ethical content, especially relative to minority identity, since it begins as a product of oppression and acquires the status of social critique. While matters ethical are notoriously difficult to sort out, it is nevertheless worth pausing briefly over how ethics relates to minority identity because ethical content may serve to check fraudulent claims of minority status. For example, in South Africa of recent date, the ideology of apartheid represented the majority position because it held power, identified the nature of minority identity, and dictated differential and pejorative treatment of those in the minority. Today in South Africa, however, the apartheidists are no longer in the majority. Applying the theory of Dworkin and Dworkin, they might be construed as having a minority identity: they are identifiable, they have differential power, they are treated pejoratively, and they possess group awareness—that is, they present a set of claims that actively and consciously criticize majority society. They also believe themselves to be persecuted, and no doubt they feel suffering about their marginal position.

Why are the apartheidists not deserving of minority status? The an-

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swer is that the theories contained in apartheidist identity do not pass an ethical test. The contrast between its ethical claims and those of the majority are sufficiently striking to recognize. The apartheidists propose a racist society as the norm to which all South African citizens should adhere. Relative to South African social beliefs and those of many other countries, apartheid ideology is unacceptable on ethical grounds because it is biased, violent, and oppressive. Consequently, the apartheidists fail to persuade us with their claims, and we judge them not a minority group subject to oppression but a fringe group trying to gain unlawful advantage over others.

To summarize, the definition embraced here—and used to theorize disability identity—does not understand minority identity as statistical, fixed in time, or exclusively biological but as a politicized identity possessing the ability to offer social critiques. There are those who attack minority identities precisely because they are politicized, as if only minorities made political arguments based on identity and politicized identity in itself were a species of defective attachment. But many other examples of politicized identity exist on the current scene—Democrats, Republicans, Socialists, the Christian Coalition, the American Nazi Party, and so on. In fact, any group that forms a coalition to make arguments on its own behalf and on the behalf of others in the public forum takes on a politicized identity. Arguments to outlaw minority political action groups merely because they encourage politicized identities would have to abolish other political groups as well.

Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment

Feminist philosophers have long argued that all knowledge is situated, that it adheres in social locations, that it is embodied, with the consequence that they have been able to claim that people in marginal social positions enjoy an epistemological privilege that allows them to theorize society differently from those in dominant social locations (Haraway 183–201; Harding). Knowledge is situated, first of all, because it is based on perspective. There is a difference between the knowledge present in a view of the earth from the moon and a view of the earth from the perspective of an ant. We speak blandly of finding different perspectives on things, but

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different perspectives do in fact give varying conceptions of objects, especially social objects. Nevertheless, situated knowledge does not rely only on changing perspectives. Situated knowledge adheres in embodiment. The disposition of the body determines perspectives, but it also spices these perspectives with phenomenological knowledge—lifeworld experience—that affects the interpretation of perspective. To take a famous example from Iris Young, the fact that many women "throw like a girl" is not based on a physical difference. The female arm is as capable of throwing a baseball as the male arm. It is the representation of femininity in a given society that disables women, pressuring them to move their bodies in certain, similar ways, and once they become accustomed to moving in these certain, similar ways, it is difficult to retrain the body. "Women in sexist society are physically handicapped," Young explains. "Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified" (171). It is possible to read the differential and pejorative treatment of women, as if it were a disability, on the surface of their skin, in muscle mass, in corporeal agility. This form of embodiment is also, however, a form of situated knowledge about the claims being made about and by women in a given society. To consider some positive examples, the particular embodiment of a woman means that she might, after experiencing childbirth, have a new and useful perception of physical pain. Women may also have, because of menstruation, a different knowledge of blood. Female gender identity is differently embodied because of women's role in reproductive labor. The presence of the body does not boil down only to perspective but to profound ideas and significant theories about the world.

Embodiment is, of course, central to the field of disability studies. In fact, a focus on disability makes it easier to understand that embodiment and social location are one and the same. Arguments for the specificity of disability identity tend to stress the critical nature of embodiment, and the tacit or embodied knowledge associated with particular disabilities often justifies their value to larger society. For example, George Lane's body, we will see in chapter 6, incorporates a set of theoretical claims about architecture that the Supreme Court interprets in its ruling against the State of Tennessee, finding that Lane's inability to enter the Polk County Courthouse reveals a pattern of discrimination against people with disabilities

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found throughout the American court system. Chapter 5 explores disability passing not as avoidance of social responsibility or manipulation for selfish interests but as a form of embodied knowledge—forced into usage by prejudices against disability—about the relationship between the social environment and human ability. The young deaf woman who tries to pass for hearing will succeed only if she possesses significant knowledge about the informational potential, manners, physical gestures, conversational rituals, and cultural activities that define hearing in her society. Disabled people who pass for able-bodied are neither cowards, cheats, nor con artists but skillful interpreters of the world from whom we all might learn.

Dossier No. 2
New York Times Online
November 15, 2006

Officials Clash over Mentally Ill in Florida Jails
By Abby Goodnough

MIAMI, Nov. 14—For years, circuit judges here have ordered state officials to obey Florida law and promptly transfer severely mentally ill inmates from jails to state hospitals. But with few hospital beds available, Gov. Jeb Bush's administration began flouting those court orders in August. . . .

"This type of arrogant activity cannot be tolerated in an orderly society," Judge Crockett Farnell of Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Court wrote in an Oct. 11 ruling.

State law requires that inmates found incompetent to stand trial be moved from county jails to psychiatric hospitals within 15 days of the state's receiving the commitment orders. Florida has broken that law for years, provoking some public defenders to seek court orders forcing swift compliance. . . .

Two mentally ill inmates in the Escambia County Jail in Pensacola died over the last year and a half after being subdued by guards, according to news reports. And in the Pinellas County Jail in Clearwater, a schizophrenic inmate gouged out his eye after waiting weeks for a hospital bed, his lawyer said. . . .

The problem is not unique to Florida, although it is especially severe in Miami-Dade County, which has one of the nation's largest percentages of mentally ill residents, according to the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, an advocacy group. . . .

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> In Miami, an average of 25 to 40 acutely psychotic people live in a unit of the main county jail that a lawyer for Human Rights Watch, Jennifer Daskal, described as squalid after visiting last month. . . . Ms. Daskal said that some of the unit's 14 "suicide cells"—dim, bare and designed for one inmate—were holding two or three at a time, and that the inmates were kept in their cells 24 hours a day except to shower. . . .

But embodiment also appears as a bone of contention in disability studies because it seems caught between competing models of disability. Briefly, the medical model defines disability as a property of the individual body that requires medical intervention. The medical model has a biological orientation, focusing almost exclusively on disability as embodiment. The social model opposes the medical model by defining disability relative to the social and built environment, arguing that disabling environments produce disability in bodies and require interventions at the level of social justice. Some scholars complain that the medical model pays too much attention to embodiment, while the social model leaves it out of the picture. Without returning to a medical model, which labels individuals as defective, the next step for disability studies is to develop a theory of complex embodiment that values disability as a form of human variation.

The theory of complex embodiment raises awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body, but it emphasizes as well that some factors affecting disability, such as chronic pain, secondary health effects, and aging, derive from the body. These last disabilities are neither less significant than disabilities caused by the environment nor to be considered defects or deviations merely because they are resistant to change. Rather, they belong to the spectrum of human variation, conceived both as variability between individuals and as variability within an individual's life cycle, and they need to be considered in tandem with social forces affecting disability.[2] The theory of complex embodiment views the economy between social representations and the body not as unidirectional as in the social model, or nonexistent as in the medical model, but as reciprocal. Complex embodiment theorizes the body and its representations as mutually transformative. Social representations obviously affect the experience of the body, as Young makes clear in her

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seminal essay, but the body possesses the ability to determine its social representation as well, and some situations exist where representation exerts no control over the life of the body.

As a living entity, the body is vital and chaotic, possessing complexity in equal share to that claimed today by critical and cultural theorists for linguistic systems. The association of the body with human mortality and fragility, however, forces a general distrust of the knowledge embodied in it. It is easier to imagine the body as a garment, vehicle, or burden than as a complex system that defines our humanity, any knowledge that we might possess, and our individual and collective futures. Disability gives even greater urgency to the fears and limitations associated with the body, tempting us to believe that the body can be changed as easily as changing clothes. The ideology of ability stands ready to attack any desire to know and to accept the disabled body in its current state. The more likely response to disability is to try to erase any signs of change, to wish to return the body magically to a past era of supposed perfection, to insist that the body has no value as human variation if it is not flawless.

Ideology and prejudice, of course, abound in all circles of human existence, labeling some groups and individuals as inferior or less than human: people of color, women, the poor, people with different sexual orientations, and the disabled confront the intolerance of society on a daily basis. In nearly no other sphere of existence, however, do people risk waking up one morning having become the persons whom they hated the day before. Imagine the white racist suddenly transformed into a black man, the anti-Semite into a Jew, the misogynist into a woman, and one might begin to approach the change in mental landscape demanded by the onset of disability. We require the stuff of science fiction to describe these scenarios, most often for comic effect or paltry moralizing. But no recourse to fiction is required to imagine an able-bodied person becoming disabled. It happens every minute of every day.

The young soldier who loses his arm on an Iraqi battlefield wakes up in bed having become the kind of person whom he has always feared and whom society names as contemptible (Corbett). Given these circumstances, how might we expect him to embrace and to value his new identity? He is living his worst nightmare. He cannot sleep. He hates what he has become. He distances himself from his wife and family. He begins to drink too much. He tries to use a functional prosthetic, but he loathes be-

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ing seen with a hook. The natural prosthetic offered to him by Army doctors does not really work, and he prefers to master tasks with his one good arm. He cannot stand the stares of those around him, the looks of pity and contempt as he tries to perform simple tasks in public, and he begins to look upon himself with disdain.

The soldier has little chance, despite the promise of prosthetic science, to return to his former state. What he is going through is completely understandable, but he needs to come to a different conception of himself, one based not on the past but on the present and the future. His body will continue to change with age, and he may have greater disabling conditions in the future. He is no different in this regard from any other human being. Some disabilities can be approached by demanding changes in how people with disabilities are perceived, others by changes in the built environment. Some can be treated through medical care. Other disabilities cannot be approached by changes in either the environment or the body. In almost every case, however, people with disabilities have a better chance of future happiness and health if they accept their disability as a positive identity and benefit from the knowledge embodied in it. The value of people with disabilities to themselves does not lie in finding a way to return through medical intervention to a former physical perfection, since that perfection is a myth, nor in trying to conceal from others and themselves that they are disabled. Rather, embodiment seen complexly understands disability as an epistemology that rejects the temptation to value the body as anything other than what it was and that embraces what the body has become and will become relative to the demands on it, whether environmental, representational, or corporeal.

Intersectional Identity Complexly Embodied

The ultimate purpose of complex embodiment as theory is to give disabled people greater knowledge of and control over their bodies in situations where increased knowledge and control are possible. But the theory has side benefits for at least two crucial debates raging on the current scene as well. First, complex embodiment makes a contribution to influential arguments about intersectionality—the idea that analyses of social oppression take account of overlapping identities based on race,

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gender, sexuality, class, and disability.[3] While theorists of intersectionality have never argued for a simple additive model in which oppressed identities are stacked one upon another, a notion of disability embodiment helps to resist the temptation of seeing some identities as more pathological than others, and it offers valuable advice about how to conceive the standpoint of others for the purpose of understanding the prejudices against them. This is not to suggest that the intersection of various identities produces the same results for all oppressed groups, since differences in the hierarchical organization of race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability do exist (Collins 2003, 212). Rather, it is to emphasize, first, that intersectionality as a theory references the tendency of identities to construct one another reciprocally (Collins 2003, 208); second, that identities are not merely standpoints where one may stand or try to stand but also complex embodiments; and, third, that the ideology of ability uses the language of pathology to justify labeling some identities as inferior to others.[4]

For example, theorists of intersectional identity might find useful the arguments in disability studies against disability simulation because they offer a view of complex embodiment that enlarges standpoint theory. The applied fields of occupational therapy and rehabilitation science sometimes recommend the use of disability simulations to raise the consciousness of therapists who treat people with disabilities. Instructors ask students to spend a day in a wheelchair or to try navigating classroom buildings blindfolded to get a better sense of the challenges faced by their patients. The idea is that students may stand for a time in the places occupied by disabled people and come to grasp their perspectives. Disability theorists have attacked the use of simulations for a variety of reasons, the most important being that they fail to give the student pretenders a sense of the embodied knowledge contained in disability identities. Disability simulations of this kind fail because they place students in a time-one position of disability, before knowledge about disability is acquired, usually resulting in emotions of loss, shock, and pity at how dreadful it is to be disabled. Students experience their body relative to their usual embodiment, and they become so preoccupied with sensations of bodily inadequacy that they cannot perceive the extent to which their "disability" results from social rather than physical causes. Notice that such games focus almost entirely on the phenomenology of the individual body. The pretender asks how his or her body would be changed, how his or her per-

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sonhood would be changed, by disability. It is an act of individual imagination, then, not an act of cultural imagination. Moreover, simulations tempt students to play the game of "What is Worse?" as they experiment with different simulations. Is it worse to be blind or deaf, worse to lose a leg or an arm, worse to be paralyzed or deaf, mute, and blind? The result is a thoroughly negative and unrealistic impression of disability.

The critique of disability simulation has applications in several areas of intersectional theory. First, the practice of peeling off minority identities from people to determine their place in the hierarchy of oppression is revealed to degrade all minority identities by giving a one-dimensional view of them. It also fails to understand the ways in which different identities constitute one another. Identities may trump one another in the hierarchy of oppression, but intersectional identity, because embodied complexly, produces not competition between minority identities but "outsider" theories about the lived experience of oppression (see Collins 1998). Additionally, coming to an understanding of intersecting minority identities demands that one imagine social location not only as perspective but also as complex embodiment, and complex embodiment combines social and corporeal factors. Rather than blindfolding students for a hour, then, it is preferable to send them off wearing sunglasses and carrying a white cane, in the company of a friend, to restaurants and department stores, where they may observe firsthand the spectacle of discrimination against blind people as passersby avoid and gawk at them, clerks refuse to wait on them or condescend to ask the friend what the student is looking for, and waiters request, usually at the top of their lungs and very slowly (since blind people must also be deaf and cognitively disabled), what the student would like to eat.[5]

It is crucial to resist playing the game of "What Is Worse?" when conceiving of intersectional identity, just as it is when imagining different disabilities. Asking whether it is worse to be a woman or a Latina, worse to be black or blind, worse to be gay or poor registers each identity as a form of ability that has greater or lesser powers to overcome social intolerance and prejudice. Although one may try to keep the focus on society and the question of whether it oppresses one identity more than another, the debate devolves all too soon and often to discussions of the comparative costs of changing society and making accommodations, comparisons about quality of life, and speculations about whether social disadvantages

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are intrinsic or extrinsic to the group. The compelling issue for minority identity does not turn on the question of whether one group has the more arduous existence but on the fact that every minority group faces social discrimination, violence, and intolerance that exert toxic and unfair influence on the ability to live life to the fullest (see Asch 406–7).

Social Construction Complexly Embodied

Second, the theory of complex embodiment makes it possible to move forward arguments raging currently about social construction, identity, and the body. Aside from proposing a theory better suited to the experiences of disabled people, the goal is to advance questions in identity and body theory unresponsive to the social construction model. Chapters 3, 4, and 6 make an explicit adjustment in social construction theory by focusing on the realism of identities and bodies. By "realism" I understand neither a positivistic claim about reality unmediated by social representations, nor a linguistic claim about reality unmediated by objects of representation, but a theory that describes reality as a mediation, no less real for being such, between representation and its social objects.[6] Rather than viewing representation as a pale shadow of the world or the world as a shadow world of representation, my claim is that both sides push back in the construction of reality. The hope is to advance discourse theory to the next stage by defining construction in a radical way, one that reveals constructions as possessing both social and physical form. While identities are socially constructed, they are nevertheless meaningful and real precisely because they are complexly embodied. The complex embodiment apparent in disability is an especially strong example to contemplate because the disabled body compels one to give concrete form to the theory of social construction and to take its metaphors literally.

Consider an introductory example of the way in which disability complexly embodied extends the social construction argument in the direction of realism. In August 2000 a controversy about access at the Galehead hut in the Appalachian Mountains came to a climax (Goldberg). The Appalachian Mountain Club of New Hampshire had just constructed a rustic thirty-eight bed lodge at an elevation of thirty-eight hundred feet. The United States Forest Service required that the hut comply with the

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Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and be accessible to people with disabilities, that it have a wheelchair ramp and grab bars in larger toilet stalls. The Appalachian Mountain Club had to pay an extra $30,000 to $50,000 for a building already costing $400,000 because the accessible features were late design changes. Its members ridiculed the idea that the building, which could be reached only by a super-rugged 4.6 mile trail, would ever be visited by wheelchair users, and the media tended to take their side.

At this point a group from Northeast Passage, a program at the University of New Hampshire that works with people with disabilities, decided to make a visit to the Galehead hut. Jill Gravink, the director of Northeast Passage, led a group of three hikers in wheelchairs and two on crutches on a twelve-hour climb to the lodge, at the end of which they rolled happily up the ramp to its front door. A local television reporter on the scene asked why, if people in wheelchairs could drag themselves up the trail, they could not drag themselves up the steps into the hut, implying that the ramp was a waste of money. Gravink responded, "Why bother putting steps on the hut at all? Why not drag yourself in through a window?"

The design environment, Gravink suggests pointedly, determines who is able-bodied at the Galehead lodge. The distinction between the disabled and nondisabled is socially constructed, and it is a rather fine distinction at that. Those who are willing and able to climb stairs are considered able-bodied, while those who are not willing and able to climb stairs are disabled. However, those who do climb stairs but are not willing and able to enter the building through a window are not considered disabled. It is taken for granted that nondisabled people may choose when to be able-bodied. In fact, the built environment is full of technologies that make life easier for those people who possess the physical power to perform tasks without these technologies. Stairs, elevators, escalators, washing machines, leaf and snow blowers, eggbeaters, chainsaws, and other tools help to relax physical standards for performing certain tasks. These tools are nevertheless viewed as natural extensions of the body, and no one thinks twice about using them. The moment that individuals are marked as disabled or diseased, however, the expectation is that they will maintain the maximum standard of physical performance at every moment, and the technologies designed to make their life easier are viewed as expensive additions, unnecessary accommodations, and a burden on society.

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The example of the Galehead hut exposes the ideology of ability—the ideology that uses ability to determine human status, demands that people with disabilities always present as able-bodied as possible, and measures the value of disabled people in dollars and cents. It reveals how constructed are our attitudes about identity and the body. This is a familiar point, and usually social analysis comes to a conclusion here, no doubt because the idea of construction is more metaphorical than real. The implication seems to be that knowledge of an object as socially constructed is sufficient to undo any of its negative effects. How many books and essays have been written in the last ten years, whose authors are content with the conclusion that x, y, or z is socially constructed, as if the conclusion itself were a victory over oppression?

Far from being satisfied with this conclusion, my analysis here will always take it as a point of departure from which to move directly to the elucidation of embodied causes and effects. Oppression is driven not by individual, unconscious syndromes but by social ideologies that are embodied, and precisely because ideologies are embodied, their effects are readable, and must be read, in the construction and history of societies. When a Down syndrome citizen tries to enter a polling place and is turned away, a social construction is revealed and must be read. When wheelchair users are called selfish if they complain about the inaccessibility of public toilets, a social construction is revealed and must be read (Shapiro 1994, 126–27). When handicapped entrances to buildings are located in the rear, next to garbage cans, a social construction is revealed and must be read. When a cosmetic surgeon removes the thumb on a little boy's right hand because he was born with no thumb on his left hand, a social construction is revealed and must be read (Marks 67). What if we were to embrace the metaphor implied by social construction, if we required that the "construction" in social construction be understood as a building, as the Galehead hut for example, and that its blueprint be made available? Not only would this requirement stipulate that we elaborate claims about social construction in concrete terms, it would insist that we locate the construction in time and place as a form of complex embodiment.

Whenever anyone mentions the idea of social construction, we should ask on principle to see the blueprint—not to challenge the value of the idea but to put it to practical use—to map as many details about the construction as possible and to track its political, epistemological, and real

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effects in the world of human beings. To encourage this new requirement, I cite three familiar ideas about social construction, as currently theorized, from which flow—or at least should—three methodological principles. These three principles underlie the arguments to follow, suggesting how to look for blueprints and how to begin reading them:

- Knowledge is socially situated—which means that knowledge has an objective and verifiable relation to its social location.
- Identities are socially constructed—which means that identities contain complex theories about social reality.
- Some bodies are excluded by dominant social ideologies—which means that these bodies display the workings of ideology and expose it to critique and the demand for political change.