

1

Introduction: Disability, the Missing Term in the Race, Class, Gender Triad

We are prisoners of a grammar invented at an early stage of human evolution, and it seems that, since we can think only by using language, our reason too is conditioned by the most primitive notions of reality.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*

I

The term 'disability,' as it is commonly and professionally used, is an absolute category without a level or threshold. One is either disabled or not. One cannot be a little disabled any more than one can be a little pregnant.

One must view with suspicion any term of such Procrustean dimensions. A concept with such a univalent stranglehold on meaning must contain within it a dark side of power, control, and fear. The aim of this book is to look into this dark side, to rend the veil from the apparently obvious object: the disabled person.⁷

For most temporarily abled people,⁸ the issue of disability is a simple one. A person with a visible physical impairment (someone with an injured, nonstandard or nonfunctioning body or body part) or with a sensory or mental impairment (someone who has trouble hearing, seeing, or processing information) is considered disabled. The average, well-meaning 'normal' observer feels sorry for that disabled person, feels awkward about relating to the person,

believes that the government or charity should provide special services, and gives thanks for not being disabled (as in 'I cried that I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet').

What does not occur to many people is that disability is not a minor issue that relates to a relatively small number of unfortunate people; it is part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances. Disability is not an object – a woman with a cane – but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses. Just as the conceptualization of race, class, and gender shapes the lives of those who are not black, poor, or female, so the concept of disability regulates the bodies of those who are 'normal.' In fact, the very concept of normalcy by which most people (by definition) shape their existence is in fact tied inexorably to the concept of disability, or rather, the concept of disability is a function of a concept of normalcy. Normalcy and disability are part of the same system.

It has been the rule that the subject of disability, until quite recently, has been written about by professionals who work with, medically treat, or study the disabled. In that discourse, people with disabilities have been an object of study, and the resulting information produced has constituted a discourse as controlling as any described by Michel Foucault. It has only been in recent years that people with disabilities have found a political voice and power and have been able to write about this experience. The previous discourse, heavily medicalized and oriented toward care and treatment, served its institutional purposes well. But it failed to understand dialectically its own position in the economy of power and control, and it failed to historicize its own assumptions and agency.

So the first task at hand is to understand and theorize the discourse of disability, to see that the object of disability studies is not the person using the wheelchair or the Deaf person but the set of social, historical, economic, and cultural processes that regulate and control the way we think about and think through the body. In addition, the presumption that disability is simply a biological

fact, a universal plight of humanity throughout the ages, needs to be challenged. This study aims to show that disability, as we know the concept, is really a socially driven relation to the body that became relatively organized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This relation is propelled by economic and social factors and can be seen as part of a more general project to control and regulate the body. This analysis fits in with other aspects of the regulation of the body that we have come to call crime, sexuality, gender, disease, subalternity, and so on. Preindustrial societies tended to treat people with impairments as part of the social fabric, although admittedly not kindly, while postindustrial societies, instituting 'kindness,' ended up segregating and ostracizing such individuals through the discursivity of disability.

The category of 'disability,' while politically useful, particularly in the advantages and legal protection provided by legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, is not without problems. Many Deaf people, for example, do not see themselves in the category of disabled, preferring to call themselves a linguistic minority. Indeed, the term 'physical minorities' gives more of a political sense to physical difference than the more abstract category 'disabled.' In the task of rethinking and theorizing disability, one of the first steps is to understand the relationship between a physical impairment and the political, social, even spatial environment that places that impairment in a matrix of meanings and significations.

To do this, one must begin to rethink disability so that one may consider the world-view presented by that disabled moment. I use the concept of the 'moment' in its philosophical context to allow us to think of blindness or deafness, say, as modalities not disabilities. I also want to separate the attribute from a time frame – so that blindness is not placed in a time continuity (a 'chronotope,' to use the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's term). When one speaks of disability, one always associates it with a story, places it in a narrative. A person became deaf, became blind, was born blind, became quadriplegic. The disability immediately becomes part of a chronotope, a time-sequenced narrative, embedded in a story. But by narrativizing an impairment, one tends to sentimentalize it

and link it to the bourgeois sensibility of individualism and the drama of an individual story, as we have seen in so many films treating the subject of disability. So deafness, a physical fact, becomes deafness, a story, with a hero or a victim, a love story, a set of attributes (lively, hard-working, hot-headed). By using the concept of the disabled moment, I want to defamiliarize disability, denarrativize it, and in a sense debourgeoisify it. Of course, I do not intend permanently to divorce disability from people, but such a move might be necessary as an initial tactic.

As an example of the act of defamiliarization I am discussing, consider that everyone who reads this book is deaf. Even if you are not Deaf, you are deaf while you are reading. You are in a deafened modality or moment. All readers are deaf because they are defined by a process that does not require hearing or speaking (vocalizing). The sign language they are participating in is one that uses marks of ink on paper (or electrical/chemical markings on computer screens). Reading is a silent process, and although anyone can vocalize what he or she reads, the vocalization is a second-order activity. In fact, to be alive and thinking in the twentieth century implies that you have performed a lot of non-oral/aural activity of this sort. Your ideas, your thoughts, your beliefs, even your emotional, erotic life have been shaped by this nonverbal, nonauditory mode of sign language. This is a moment of disability.

I am making this point to illustrate how audist our biases are when it comes to thinking about deafness and hearing. It will be one of the aims of this book to lay bare the routine assumptions made about the 'clear' polarities of deafness and hearing, of disabled and abled. That binarism, like so many others – straight/gay, male/female, black/white, rich/poor – is part of an ideology of containment and a politics of power and fear. While many progressive intellectuals have stepped forward to decry racism, sexism, and class bias, it has not occurred to most of them that the very foundations on which their information systems are built, their very practices of reading and writing, seeing, thinking, and moving are themselves laden with assumptions about hearing, deafness,

blindness, normalcy, paraplegia, and ability and disability in general. Indeed, our language is peppered with words and phrases like 'lame,' 'blind,' 'deaf and dumb,' 'deaf, dumb, and blind,' 'idiotic,' and so on that carry with them moral and ethical implications.⁹

For many years it has become a mark of commonplace courtesy and intellectual rigor to note occasions when racism, sexism, or class bias creep into discourse. The intellectual left, indeed, has been accused of being too rigorous in its insistence on calling people 'African-American', 'Ms,' 'othered' and so on. Yet there is a strange and really unaccountable silence when the issue of disability is raised (or, more to the point, never raised); the silence is stranger, too, since so much of left criticism has devoted itself to the issue of the body, of the social construction of sexuality and gender. Alternative bodies people this discourse: gay, lesbian, hermaphrodite, criminal, medical, and so on. But lurking behind these images of transgression and deviance is a much more transgressive and deviant figure: the disabled body.¹⁰

The disabled body is a nightmare for the fashionable discourse of theory because that discourse has been limited by the very predilection of the dominant, ableist culture. The body is seen as a site of *jouissance*, a native ground of pleasure, the scene of an excess that defies reason, that takes dominant culture and its rigid, power-laden vision of the body to task. The body of the left is an unruly body: a bad child thumbing its nose at the parent's bourgeois decorum; a rebellious daughter transgressing against the phallogentric patriarch. The nightmare of that body is one that is deformed, maimed, mutilated, broken, diseased. Observations of chimpanzees reveal that they fly in terror from a decapitated chimp; dogs, by contrast, will just sniff at the remains of a fellow dog. That image of the screaming chimpanzee facing the mutilated corpse is the image of the critic of *jouissance* contemplating the paraplegic, the disfigured, the mutilated, the deaf, the blind. Rather than face this ragged image, the critic turns to the fluids of sexuality, the gloss of lubrication, the glossary of the body as text, the heteroglossia of the intertext, the glossolalia of the schizophrenic. But almost never the body of the differently abled.

Recently, an editor at a prominent university press denied this assertion of culpability by claiming in all good faith that academics really were not exposed to many disabled people. This silence was a sin of omission rather than commission, he maintained, since how many deaf people did one run into? But this editor was simply participating in an ableist discourse – setting the limits of the argument with common sense. In some universities where diversity requirements have been instituted, there has been a struggle over including disability – which seems to some people of color to be a side current that would simply muddy the waters about the central issue of racism.

To the dominant culture, even to what can still be considered the counter-culture, by their own definitions, only a small fraction of the population appears to be disabled; these people with disabilities would be equally distributed across race, gender, and class lines. This notion must, however, be seen as ideology, not as knowledge. In the realm of the body, ableist culture still reigns supreme. However, by most calculations, about one in ten people are disabled. About the same percentage have some hearing loss, if you include late-deafened adults. But the editor maintained that such people, hard-of-hearing grandparents or cousins with bad knees or eyes, could be excluded since they were not ‘really’ disabled. And advocates of diversity requirements do not recognize that cohort as constituting a legitimate minority.

Did these people realize that when they encountered the work of Rosa Luxemburg (who limped), Antonio Gramsci (a crippled, dwarfed hunchback), John Milton (blind), Alexander Pope (dwarfed hunchback), George Gordon Byron (club foot), José Luis Borges, James Joyce, and James Thurber (all blind), Harriet Martineau (deaf), Toulouse-Lautrec (spinal deformity), Frida Kahlo (osteomyelitis), Virginia Woolf (lupus), they were meeting people with disabilities? Do filmgoers realize when they watch the films of John Ford, Raoul Walsh, André de Toth, Nicholas Ray, Tay Garnett and William Wyler that these directors were all physically impaired (Norden 1994, 4)? Why is it when one looks up these figures in dictionaries of biography or encyclopedias that

their physical disabilities are usually not mentioned – unless the disability is seen as related to creativity, as in the case of the blind bard Milton or the deaf Beethoven? There is an ableist notion at work here that anyone who creates a canonical work must be physically able. Likewise, why do we not know that Helen Keller was a socialist, a member of the Wobblies, the International Workers of the World, and an advocate of free love? We assume that our ‘official’ mascots of disability are nothing else but their disability.

The problem, of course, is that the manner in which this society defines disability in fact creates the category. Able-bodied (or temporarily able-bodied) people safely wall off the severely disabled so that they cannot be seen as part of a continuum of physical differences, just as white culture isolates blackness as a skin color so as not to account for degrees of melanin production. How many people with hearing aids consider themselves deaf; how many people with knee braces consider themselves impaired?¹¹

The fact is that impairment of the human body is a relatively common phenomenon. It has been estimated that there are some 500 million severely impaired people in the world, approximately one in ten among the world’s population (Shirley, 1983). That statistic is repeated at the national level: in 1991 the Institute of Medicine estimated a total of 35 million disabled in the USA, one in seven people. Other federal data go as high as 43 million. But these data do not include those with AIDS or those who are HIV-positive. (Shapiro 1993, 7). A United States census estimates that 13,110,000 people aged from sixteen to sixty-four have work-related disabilities, putting 8.5 percent of all working-age females and 9.3 percent of all working-age men in this category (US Bureau of Census 1982). When we consider that about one in ten Americans lives below the poverty line, or that one in eight women will develop breast cancer, we can see that disability is by no means uncommon.

In the process of disabling people with disabilities, ableist society creates the absolute category of disability. ‘Normal’ people tend to think of ‘the disabled’ as the deaf, the blind, the orthopedically

impaired, the mentally retarded. But the fact is that disability includes, according to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, those who are regarded as having a limitation or interference with daily life activities such as hearing, speaking, seeing, walking, moving, thinking, breathing, and learning. Under this definition, one now has to include people with invisible impairments such as arthritis, diabetes, epilepsy, muscular dystrophy, cystic fibrosis, multiple sclerosis, heart and respiratory problems, cancer, developmental disabilities, dyslexia, AIDS, and so on (Fine and Asch 1988, 9). When we start conceiving of disability as a descriptive term and not as an absolute category, then we can begin to think in theoretical and political ways about this category.

Another issue to recall is that disabilities are acquired. Only 15 percent of people with disabilities are born with their impairments. Disabilities are acquired by living in the world, but also by working in factories, driving insufficiently safe cars, living in toxic environments or high-crime areas. Poor people comprise a disproportionate number of the disabled – this is borne out by comparisons both within the United States and between First and Third World countries – frequently born with low weight, succumbing to diseases that vaccines and medicines would prevent, working and living in dangerous conditions, and living with poor public hygiene. In Uganda, for example, the major causes of disabling impairments are malnutrition, communicable diseases, low quality of prenatal care, and accidents including crime-related incidents (Mallory 1993, 87). In addition, people aged over sixty-five make up one-third of those with disabilities (Shapiro 1993, 6). The longer we live, the more likely we are to be disabled. Furthermore, medical advances have kept people alive who otherwise would have died from their disabilities. This increase in the numbers of the disabled is particularly notable in the case of premature babies, those with spinal cord injuries, and older people with debilitating conditions. In sum, there are more disabled people in the USA than there are, say, African-Americans. The odds are pretty good that many 'normal' people reading these words will become disabled within twenty or thirty

years, and many readers with disabilities will become people with multiple disabilities.

Why we think of disability as a totalizing category is complex. 'The label of disability carries with it such a powerful imputation of inability to perform any adult social function that there is no other descriptor needed by the public' (Gliedman and Roth 1980, cited in Fine and Asch 1988, 12). The point is that successful disabled people – the Julius Caesars, the Itzak Perlman, the Sarah Bernhardt – have their disability erased by their success. And as for the more famous people with remembered disabilities – John Milton, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, or even Stevie Wonder – we tend to see them as people who overcame their disabilities or used them in ways we conventionally associate with the genius of creativity.

It is interesting that the historical record rarely reveals disability among figures in government, perhaps because a physical impairment was not judged important to one's ability to perform the duties of public office in the preindustrial world. It comes as a surprise, therefore, to read the following description of King James I of England by a contemporary: 'His legs were very weak, having had, as was thought, some foul play in his youth, or rather before he was born, that he was not able to stand at seven years of age – that weakness made him ever leaning on other men's shoulders' (Youngs et al. 1988, 133). Similarly, though rarely referred to in contemporary records, we know that Peter Stuyvesant, first governor of New Amsterdam, had only one leg, that Gouverneur Morris, who helped draft the Constitution and was later a senator from New York, wore a 'rough stick' to replace the leg he lost in a 1780 carriage accident. Stephen Hopkins, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, had cerebral palsy, which he referred to when he took the pen to sign the document saying, 'My hand trembles but my heart does not' (Shapiro 1993, 59). The fact that we do not know this history of disability, that the record has never taken note of these impairments, shows us, perhaps, that such differences were not, by definition, memorable. Or if they were memorable were not seen as impairing function.

'The crucial point is that the disabled person, as conceived by the nondisabled world, has no abilities or social functions [and] . . . those who do perform successfully are no longer viewed as disabled' (Fine and Asch 1988, 12). This erasure occurs because stereotyping requires that a person be categorized in terms of one exclusive trait. Disabled people are thought of primarily in terms of their disability, just as sexual preference, gender, or ethnicity becomes the defining factor in perceiving another person.

There is a tremendous conceptual gap between being impaired and being disabled. As soon as we use the term 'disabled' we add a political element: suddenly there is a disabler and a disabled. Claire Liachowitz makes the point forcefully:

much of the inability to function that characterizes physically impaired people is an outcome of political and social decisions rather than medical limitations . . . an increasing number of sociological and psychological theorists regard disability as a complex of constraints that the able-bodied population imposes on the behavior of physically impaired people. (Liachowitz 1988, xi, xiii)

This conceptualization involves the idea that in an ableist society, the 'normal' people have constructed the world physically and cognitively to reward those with like abilities and handicap those with unlike abilities. For example, television had the capacity to caption broadcasts for a long time, but by not making such technology available, networks made it difficult if not impossible for deaf viewers to follow programs. Now that all televisions in America will have a decoder chip built into them, deaf viewers can have the opportunity to watch and understand any television show. Similarly, people in wheelchairs would have no problem with access to buildings or transportation if architecture and design considered accommodating them. Only in 1994 did Avis, at the prodding of the Attorney General, agree to install more hand controls for paraplegics in its cars (*New York Times*, 2 September 1994, A:20). Operas, plays, and television broadcasts have begun, on a very limited basis, to provide visual interpreters

for blind people. Again, if exhibitions supposedly open to the 'public' were to accommodate the 10 percent of the population with disabilities by having interpretative facilities for the blind, the deaf, people in wheelchairs, and so on, then such people would be able to attend as if 'normal.'¹²

In fashioning some kind of theoretical approach to disability, one must consider the fact that the disabled body is not a discrete object but rather a set of social relations. In fact, the body generally, as I will discuss in Chapter 6, has been conceptualized as a simple object when it is in fact a complex focus for competing power structures. For example, if I ask you to think about the nude in art, chances are good that you will visualize a specific kind of body. Chances are remarkably good that the body will be female, white, and not visibly impaired. Few readers would imagine an Asian woman or a woman of color, even fewer a nude using a wheelchair. The reasons for such visualized assumptions are complex, involving further assumptions about beauty, about idealization, about sexuality, about gender, and so on. Intricately placed in that web of assumptions is a power move, I would call it, to fix the body as entire, intact, whole.

This process of visualization needs to be considered when one theorizes disability. Disability presents itself to 'normal' people through two main modalities – function and appearance. In the functional modality, disability is conceived of as inability to do something – walk, talk, hear, see, manipulate, and so on. This aspect of disability is of course part of a continuum of the many things that people can or cannot do. For example, I cannot do mathematical functions very well therefore I am somewhat learning-impaired. Few would consider that limitation a disability. But if I cannot walk very well with a prosthetic limb or a club foot, then I am disabled. The construction of disability is based on a deconstruction of a continuum. The functional modality has to do with standards of movement, sight, hearing and so on that have been established in a quantitative way. If my vision is less than 20/20 with glasses then I am legally blind, but if my vision is problematic but correctable, then I am not. These standards are part of a quantification of the

human body begun in the nineteenth century which will be discussed in Chapter 2. And these standards are perhaps not unrelated to the standardized movements of the body demanded in factory work. So the functional side seems at least to have a practical, technical, class-related side to it as well.

The question of appearance is the second major modality by which disability is constructed. The person with disabilities is visualized, brought into a field of vision, and seen as a disabled person. Here Erving Goffman's notion of 'stigma' comes into play 'since it is through our sense of sight that the stigma of others most frequently becomes evident' (Goffman 1963, 48). The body of the disabled person is seen as marked by the disability. The missing limb, blind gaze, use of sign language, wheelchair or prosthesis is seen by the 'normal' observer. Disability is a specular moment.¹³ The power of the gaze to control, limit, and patrol the disabled person is brought to the fore. Accompanying the gaze are a welter of powerful emotional responses. These responses can include horror, fear, pity, compassion, and avoidance.

Several points are to be made here. The first is that attention must be paid to the violence of the response – in a way more than to the object of the response. As Freud realized, disgust or repulsion masks a secret attraction to the object; so too must one analyze the negative feelings associated with disability. The common response of 'normal' people is to say that the disabled object produces strong feelings ranging from disgust to pity in the observer. But that approach seems to be more an ideological justification than a political explanation. Rather, it would seem more appropriate to say that the disabled object is produced or constructed by the strong feelings of repulsion. A person with an impairment is turned into a disabled person by the Medusa-like gaze of the observer; paradoxically, the observer becomes disabled by his or her reaction to the disabled person. The social context becomes disabled, as one sociologist detailed the stages of this process: '... the familiar signs of discomfort and stickiness [of the 'normal' toward people with disabilities]: the guarded references, the common everyday words suddenly made taboo, the fixed stare

elsewhere, the artificial levity, the compulsive loquaciousness, the awkward solemnity' (cited in Goffman 1963, 19).

What is repulsion after all but the personal, internalized version of the desire to repel, repress, extroject, annihilate the object? Repulsion is the learned response on an individual level that is carried out on a societal level in actions such as incarceration, institutionalization, segregation, discrimination, marginalization, and so on. Thus, the 'normal,' 'natural' response to a person with disabilities is in reality a socially conditioned, politically generated response. This aspect of repulsion, its constructed side, is obvious to anyone who has grown up with family members who have disabilities or to anyone who lives with a person with disabilities. In temporarily abled people brought up in disabled families the imperative to cast out, to repulse has never been established. The person with a disability is just that – a person with some kind of limitation or difference. One student told me that her mother had no fingers on one hand. As a child she had never considered this particularly strange, and she was always surprised when strangers stared at her mother's hand. To her it was a loving, caressing hand that she might joke about, kiss, or hold. The point is not that she was habituated to what others might consider a horror, but that she had not received the instruction to cast the hand away.

This brings me to another major point. Disability exists in the realm of the senses. The disabled body is embodied through the senses. So there is a kind of reciprocal relationship between the senses and disability. A person may be impaired by the lack of a sense – sight, hearing, taste, or even touch, although touch is almost never completely gone. Yet paradoxically, it is through the senses that disability is perceived. One understands this more clearly when one thinks of cyberspace. In the space of e-mail, for example, some disabilities disappear: the Deaf, for example, or people using wheelchairs or with other physical limitations, are not disabled. In 'talking' with Deaf colleagues on e-mail, particularly those whom I have never 'seen,' I often 'forget' that my interlocutor is deaf. Recently, in planning to attend a session at the Modern Language

Association on disability, I received and sent a welter of messages on e-mail to a number of people involved. I had no way of knowing which of these people was disabled, or in which way. When speaking on the telephone with a person who uses a wheelchair, I have no way of knowing if that person is unable to walk. The sense of sight, what James Joyce called 'the ineluctable modality of the visible,' is really not that ineluctable. Many disabilities are constructed through the sense of sight and can be deconstructed in virtually real locations that do not rely on sight. Or, to take another example, the Deaf are perceived as such because one hears a different speech inflection or sees sign language. Without those sensory clues, the Deaf are embedded in the sensory grid of the 'normal' person. To a passerby on the street, the Deaf person is indistinguishable from anyone else until he or she begins to engage in communication.

The point is that the body is not only – or even primarily – a physical object. It is in fact a way of organizing through the realm of the senses the variations and modalities of physical existence as they are embodied into being through a larger social/political matrix. As Robert F. Murphy points out (1987, 133), disability 'is not just a departure from the moral code, but a distortion of conventional classification and knowing.'

Another major point is that most constructions of disability assume that the person with disabilities is in some sense damaged while the observer is undamaged. Furthermore, there is an assumption that society at large is intact, normal, setting a norm, undamaged. But the notion of an undamaged observer who is part of an undamaged society is certainly one that needs to be questioned. The social critic Theodor Adorno subtitled his work *Minima Moralia* as *Reflections from a Damaged Life*. While Adorno was not disabled in any traditional sense, he saw his life as damaged because he saw society as profoundly damaged and damaging. 'Our perspective of life passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer' (Adorno 1984, 15). From a materialist perspective it is difficult to construct a model that does not include the notion that contemporary life

is disabled, dysfunctional, dystopic. Adorno wrote: 'The libidinal achievements demanded of an individual behaving as healthy in body and mind, are such as can be performed only at the cost of the profoundest mutilation . . . ' (ibid., 58). The attempt to make a simple relation between subject and object in which a disabled subject is linked to an able object is dialectical anathema. The process of perception is bound up in a toing and froing of interaction that makes the paradigm of the observer-observed patently simplistic.

So in thinking of disability, we have to consider the disability of thinking. Thought and modes of thought will necessarily contain within them their own disincentives to theorize disability. The problems of the ideology of language, the predisposition of philosophy and thought to contain within them reified elements of Enlightenment doctrines – doctrines that postulate the benefits of wholeness, of the ideal, of the totality of systems – will make it nearly impossible to wrest that language into the service of a new way of seeing (feeling, touching, signing). In theorizing disability, then, we must develop a different way of conceptualizing the visual field, of thinking about seeing, of perceiving thinking. In that sense, we will seek to correct the simple relation between subject and object, between subjected beings and bodies and their objectification by a world that sees them, and by seeing opposes them.

II

To make the point about the repression of disability more dramatic, I would like to focus on one of the foundational ableist myths of our culture: that the norm for humans is to speak and hear, to engage in communication through speaking and hearing. In challenging this supposition, I will rely on some of the arguments put forth by Jeffrey Kittay and Wlad Godzich in *The Emergence of Prose*. In the same sense that the norm of gender was seen as masculine, and the norm of race was seen as white, and the norm of class was seen as bourgeois, the norm of signifying practice is

seen as prose. As Kittay and Godzich point out, the impression we have is that people spoke in prose first and then in verse, while the opposite may have been true. But still we believe that the universal, undiacritical method of communication is prose. Their point is that the method that a culture chooses as its main signifying practice tells us much about that culture.

Which kinds of messages are transmitted through which kinds of signifying practices? What are the differences among signifying practices, and why is one kind of message rather than another relegated to one signifying practice rather than another? . . . Is it to be communicated between physical, bodily presences or via inert signs? (Kittay and Godzich 1987, 4)

From the point of view of this chapter, the facile equation made between speaking/hearing and writing – all seen as linked signifying practices – is actually a much more complex set of arrangements. If we look carefully, we can see that the aural/oral method of communicating, itself seen as totally natural, like all signifying practices, is not natural but based on sets of assumptions about the body, about reality, and of course about power. For example, Kittay and Godzich point out that the recording of verse, the writing down of the performance of the bard, is not a simple act of transcription; nor can we say that writing has taken over from performance. They maintain that in the Middle Ages, such written texts were meant not as texts *per se* but as scripts for performance, that is, 'the text to be read is a virtuality to be actualized in performance' (ibid., 15). As texts became more common, a switch occurred to a consciousness of textuality that was no longer to be performed. It is at that moment that prose arose.

Prose for them 'withholds itself from view. . . . It thus can claim a foundational role and functions as the ground of reference, a sort of degree-zero of language for all further formal elaboration. . . . Prose is meant to have no place; prose does not happen. Prose is what assigns place' (ibid., 197). In the same way that prose appears to be a neutral, surrounding medium that invisibly embodies

thought, so too speech appears as the anterior wall onto which prose throws its grappling hook. 'But speech is not the end of the regress; speech is body-generated language; under and around speech, as in performance, is the individual *soma*' (ibid., 198). Prose points in a diexis to speech as the anterior logical ground for originary myths of signifying practice.

Kittay and Godzich alert us to beware of naturalistic explanations for signifying systems. In this world of signification, common sense makes bad sense. If we follow the commonsense explanation, humans begin in prehistory with gestures and then move to words. Rousseau puts the argument best. In his essay on the origins of language, he notes that 'speech distinguishes man among the animals' and that speech 'owes its form to natural causes alone' (1966, 5). He attributes speech to 'instinct' rather than rationality, and notes that while gesture and speech are both natural, 'the first is easier and depends less upon conventions' (ibid., 6). Rousseau moves from gesture to speech to writing as a natural progression, although he allows gesture to coexist with speech. 'It seems then that need dictated the first gestures, while the passions stimulated the first words' (ibid., 11).

What is wrong with this model? Or, more appropriately, what kind of assumptions are linked to this naturalized way of thinking about signifying practices? First, the model presumes crude gestures arose first leading to that articulated language – the aural/oral form of communication – seen as natural, common, and universal. But may we not construct another originary myth? What if a highly articulated and developed sign language like American Sign Language predated speech? Why do we always assume that crude gestures preceded speech or, as with prose, that speech preceded writing? A sign language, as is currently spoken by the Deaf throughout the world, could well have been the first signifying practice. In fact, it is impossible to ascertain whether humans spoke or signed first; or, as with the native Americans, whether they spoke and signed concurrently.

I realize I am making an extreme argument, but I am doing so to question the simplicity with which we assume that speech and

prose are natural. Even Rousseau acknowledged that sign language could be highly elaborated and not composed merely of crude gestures:

The mutes of great nobles understand each other, and understand everything that is said to them by means of signs, just as well as one can understand anything said in discourse. M. Pereyra and those like him who not only consider that mutes speak, but claim to understand what they are saying, had to learn another language, as complicated as our own, in order to understand them. (ibid., 9)

In fact, there is some evidence that sign language may well have preceded speech. Only about 250,000 years ago do we see the appearance of a human larynx similar to the one we have today. In terms of human evolution, this a very late development. If the facility for language appeared earlier, if the brain developed before the vocal chords, as it appears, then it is at least possible that sign language was the norm. The fact that the movements of the hands when people use sign language are controlled not by the motor part of the brain, which controls fine movements of the hand, but rather by the language areas in the brain called Broca's Region, indicates a somatic connection between language and signing. Researchers have recently shown us that sign language will evolve in deaf children whether or not there is a signing adult teaching them. Furthermore, research indicates that the sign language improves as the children speak with each other, even if the parent's sign language does not improve (*New York Times*, 1 September 1992, B:6). In other words, in individuals with a brain that processes language, a fully articulated sign language will develop whether or not there is a vocal capacity. Hence, a fully articulated and grammatical sign language could have been our first language, as it becomes every day when deaf children begin in the world babbling in sign.

Another point needs to be made here. In setting up the common-sense notion that language occurs in two forms and only two forms – speech or writing – we are engaging in a tautology based on an

equation of language as such and reason. Steven Pinker points out that there is no inherent connection between the particular language a culture uses and language *per se*. Nor is it correct to link that language to reason or thought. In fact, as he points out, thought and grammar are human instincts, not particularly dependent on language (Pinker 1994, 85). In other words, we can think and form concepts without language, using what he calls 'mentalese.' If what we have is a grammar that is built into our brains, or had been discovered at some time in human history, the particular kind of language that emerges – spoken, signed, or whatever – does not really matter. So the idea that sign language is the radical other of speech is actually quite incorrect (ibid., 57). Speech is no better or worse than sign, and Pinker points out that writing and speech are by no means as clear forms of communication as we might think. Even the 'obviousness' or 'naturalness' of speech is called into question. For example, Pinker notes that 'all speech is an illusion' (ibid., 159) in which we do not so much listen to a speaker as try to fit that speech into preconstructed categories, so that 'we simply hallucinate word boundaries when we reach the edge of a stretch of sound that matches some entry in our mental dictionary' (ibid., 159–60). In other words, the limpid clarity of speech is itself an illusion that conceals the extent to which the receiver of speech is continually improvising to make the act of talking make sense. Likewise writing is called into question as the best possible way to record or transfer language. Pinker points out that while language is an instinct, 'written language was not' (ibid., 189). He notes that most societies have lacked written language, that alphabetic writing was only invented once in history by a particular culture and then borrowed by other cultures. 'Illiteracy . . . is the rule in much of the world, and dyslexia . . . [is] found in five to ten percent of the population' (ibid.). By conceptualizing *language* as writing and speech, or by fetishizing the aural/oral incarnation of language, we are performing in effect an act of repression against language, in the largest sense of the term.

Rather than seeing speech as a naturally occurring and inherently superior method of communicating, it might be intellectually

more rigorous and less ableist to see that sign language may have been actively repressed in some cultures in favor of a hegemony of the aural/oral signifying practices and eventually in the direction of the hegemony of prose. For when sign language is repressed as a signifying practice, what is repressed is a connection with the body. The body of course will signify, and indeed linguistic studies routinely tell us that a great part, perhaps the majority, of communication is accomplished through body language.

As a signifying practice, what advantages are there to sign language? First, it is linked to the performative. As Kittay and Godzich suggest about verse, sign language does not have difficulty in pointing, in indicating. Prose must torturously defy its own constraints to indicate who is speaking, who is acting, where things are. Verse and sign language quite simply are more closely associated with a certain kind of truth of being. The signifying process associated with bard or *jongleur*, associated with verse, participates in a world whose communications are more immanent. Sign language, like verse, is a language in which 'the diexis is *implicit*' (Kittay and Godzich 1987, 21). In other words, the language indicates directly by embodying, literally, the narrative.

The myth that needs to be debunked is that speech is somehow closer to writing than is sign language. The 'natural' progression gesture-speech-writing is in fact wrong. Sign language is far closer to writing than is speech. Speech is an oral production linked to the mouth. Sign language can be seen as a form of writing done in space rather than on paper. Typing, for example, is closer to signing than it is to speech. This analogy allows me to argue, in Chapter 3, that the Deaf person becomes actualized as a cultural icon in the eighteenth century when European society began, on a mass scale, to read.

An illustration of our bias toward speech and writing, as well as toward seeing and hearing, can be found in a fascinating short story 'The Persistence of Vision' by John Varley. He envisions a Utopian society called Keller in which all the people are blind and deaf. The narrator intrudes into this society and is befriended by a young woman who is the daughter of blind-deaf parents although

she, like all the offspring, can see and hear, since the adults were blind and deaf as a result of a rubella epidemic, not genetic factors. The narrator's words come to us through the medium of writing, but he discovers that the society communicates through 'bodytalk,' a variant of finger spelling. The narrator's written version cannot represent the hand gestures:

'That's (—) and (—),' she said, the parentheses indicating a series of hand motions against my palm. I never learned a sound word as a name for any of them . . . and I can't reproduce the bodytalk names they had. (Varley 1978, 284)

Varley has to face the dilemma of how to represent signing in a medium that authorizes the scriptable. His narrator has to conceptualize a world in which the priority of speech and prose is made irrelevant.

But in this society there is another level of communication called 'Touch,' a deeper kind of communication achieved through physical contact of naked bodies. Blindness when combined with deafness necessitates touch. Touch, as Varley makes clear, is very underutilized in an aural/oral/visual world. The line between the sexual and the nonsexual, between heterosexuality and homosexuality is erased, since all body contact is a form of talk, and everyone talks with everyone. The language Touch is itself a metalanguage, a language beyond language.

It was a language of inventing languages. Everyone spoke their own dialect because everyone spoke with a different instrument: a different body and set of life experiences. It was modified by everything. *It would not stand still.* (ibid., 307, emphasis in original)

It is precisely in the place of deafness and blindness, so long considered to be a locus of inarticulateness, of confusion, that Varley sees the ultimate in communicative clarity. Yet the aural/oral/seeing narrator realizes he will never be able to be part of the society. 'Unless I was willing to put out my eyes and ears,

I would always be on the outside. I would be the blind and deaf one' (ibid., 312). So he leaves, only to return later and receive the gift of blindness and deafness in some real and metaphorical way at the same time.

While the short story contains some of the stereotypical hallmarks of literature about the disabled, it also manages to make some interesting points. In following the clichés of such fiction, the author gives special intuitive or compensatory powers to the blind-deaf. They are empathetic and erotic, in tune with nature and ethically upright. The story is framed by a love connection between an outsider and one of the members of the society (although in this case Pink is both of and not of the society – she is bicultural, if you like). But the main point is a strong one: that our construction of the normal world is based on a radical repression of disability, and that given certain power structures, a society of people with disabilities can and does easily survive and render 'normal' people outsiders. The aim of the rest of this book is to show how and why this is so.