Considering Disability: Disability Phenomenology's Role in Revolutionizing Theatrical Space

Carrie Sandahl

> I have a body, you are likely to say if you talk about embodiment at all; you don't say I am a body. A body is a separate entity possessable by the "I"; the "I" and the body aren't, as the copula would make them, grammatically indistinguishable.[1]
> —Nancy Mairs, "Carnal Acts"

When I was a college student, I went on a backpacking tour of Europe. The first thing I did when I got home was develop my photos so I could share my adventures with family and friends. With my parents and a few relatives gathered around our kitchen table, I narrated the journey. After the hundredth-or-so photo, I noticed my rate of speech steadily increasing until I was practically indistinguishable from an auctioneer. You see, I had to speed up because I was barely past the first week's photos when I noticed my family members' glazed eyes and stifled yawns. I sent the photos flying around the table until they began to blur, and I could feel the enthusiasm drain from my face and disappointment rise to take its place. But then, I became aware that my father had let his photos pile up next to him, and he was carefully examining each one before carefully placing it in a neat stack beside him.

I stopped feeding the photo assembly line for a moment and watched my dad watching. Without looking up, he said that he saw something odd in my photos. Though he had never been to Europe himself, he felt like he was looking at familiar landmarks in a new way. He looked and looked and turned my rendition of the Eiffel tower around in his rough farmer's hands. The rest of the family stopped to watch him watching. Finally, he figured it out. He said he was seeing Europe through my eyes. He rifled through the stack, laying the photos side by side. He pointed out that my photographs of people and things all angled upwards. Since, he is 6'3", and I am 4' 10" (on a "good" day . . . with my shoes on), he was not used

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Carrie Sandahl is an Assistant Professor and Director of Graduate Theatre Studies at Florida State University's School of Theatre. She has co-edited with Philip Auslander a collection of critical essays, *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press. She has published other articles on disability and performance in the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism, Theatre Topics, Disability Studies Quarterly, Gay and Lesbian Quarterly, Contemporary Theatre Review* and *American Theatre*. Currently, she is writing a book entitled, *Americans With Disabilities Act: Disability Performance Since the Civil Rights Era.*

to seeing people's chins instead of the tops of their heads. He pointed out that some buildings and monuments seemed to tower and tilt in ways he had not seen before. He suggested that, because I walk with a swinging gait and often lean when I stand, my photos were shot from this low, off-center vantage point. Others in my family laid out more photos and began to notice these subtleties. And I did, too. My dad said simply, "This is how Carrie sees the world."

In addition to feeling a powerful new connection with my father at this moment, I also first realized that disability is a vantage point, a perspective, a way of experiencing the world. If I had known the word back then, I would have said that disability is phenomenological. I experience the world through my disability, and I produce art through that experience. As Nancy Mairs's quotation that begins this essay emphasizes, a disabled body is not separable from an "I." My essay builds on this seemingly obvious assertion by extrapolating how disabled peoples' unique somatic experiences provide "doors of perception" to space that can sometimes radically differ from the nondisableds'. Then, I imagine how these perspectives might invigorate performance practice, a practice with unique characteristics: the use of (often) present bodies, movement of those bodies through space in actual time, and a three-dimensional space shared between actors and audience. I believe that with the exception of environmental and site-specific theatre and some performance art, theatre practice often lacks imagination in manipulating these factors and that a consideration of disability phenomenology and cultural practice might revolutionize the ways in which we craft theatrical space.

While disability is often discussed in terms of lack or as a necessary foil to understanding normalcy, rarely is disability described in *generative* terms. When critical theorists or artists invoke disability, they do not usually describe an actual disability perspective at all. For instance, Terry Eagleton explicates Heiddeger's model of a knowable object: "when the hammer breaks, when we cease to take it for granted, its familiarity is stripped from it and it yields up to us its authentic being".[2] While Heidegger may have believed that the essence of "hammer" is revealed once the hammer is broken, he fails to consider that the broken hammer may have its own alternative essence. Likewise, Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes phantom limbs, visual impairments, and neurological disorders to set normal perception into relief, rather than explicitly exploring those conditions on their own terms.[3] Even Michel Foucault's analyses that reveal the shifting discourses of madness and the rise of institutions tell us very little about the lives or experiences of those labeled "mad." Contemporary theorists such as Judith Butler mention disabled people as well; while Butler does include the disabled (albeit briefly) in her discussion of the "abject" as the culturally unintelligible, she does not postulate disabled peoples' subcultural intelligibility or performative practices.[4]

Like these theorists, artists often draw on disability as a metaphor for otherness. Disability in drama has long been used in just this way. From Oedipus's blindness, which provides him final insight; to Richard III's hunchback, which signifies his inner evil; to Laura Wingfield's limp, which represents her psychological frailty, disability is everywhere in the dramatic canon.[5] Disabled photographer and cultural theorist David Hevey describes how, in general, artists "enfreak" disabled people as a means of representing their own feelings of being an outsider.[6] He claims, for example, that photographer Diane Arbus reads "the bodily impairment of her disabled subject as a sign of disorder, even chaos; that is, as a physical manifestation of her chaos, her horror."[7] An incidence of disability also often serves as inciting incident or point of crisis in the drama. (David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have given a name to this device: "narrative prosthesis").[8] Theatrical representations of disabled characters are often removed another step from disabled people by the practice of casting able-bodied actors to play those roles. Such practices tend to filter out many markers of actual disabled bodies. A recent example from film performance is the casting of Patrick Stewart as Professor Xavier, the wheelchair-using mutant telepathic in *X-Men*. His body bears none of the markings that bodies in chairs often bear, such as altered posture, atrophied muscles, and curving feet. Even in the realm of science fiction and fantasy, disability becomes a fable for the abled.

Disability, though, can be considered differently. Disabilities are states of being that are in themselves *generative* and, once de-stigmatized, allow us to envision an enormous range of human variety—in terms of bodily, spatial, and social configurations.

Considering Disability

> It is particularly difficult to find language to describe my experience that is not relational, meaning descriptions that do not measure my movements in relation to nondisabled norms. The fact that impairment has almost always been studied from a deficit model means that we are deficient in language to describe it any other way than as a "problem."[9]
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> —Simi Linton, Claiming Disability

Given that disability is rarely considered anything but a problem, we need to find new ways of describing the experience. One place to start would be with disability rights activists, who in the United States have advanced a couple of alternative models, which are commonly referred to as the "social construction model" and the "minority model."[10] During the Civil Rights Era, activists developed and advanced these models, all the while rallying "Nothing About Us Without Us"—a demand for disabled people's leadership in anything having to do with disability. Activists first insisted that disability is not situated within pathological individuals solely in need of medical care and cure (the medical model), but is instead a fundamentally social phenomenon. The social construction model places disability within a society built for nondisabled people. In other words, disability is a disjuncture between the body and the environment. It is the stairway before the wheelchair user or written text before the blind person that handicaps an individual, not the physical impairment itself. Disability scholars who follow the social construction model unearth evidence that disability's meaning and expression (or discourses of disability) change over time according to cultural, religious, political, architectural, attitudinal, and economic factors.

The minority model extends the social construction premise that disability is a mutable category by self-consciously crafting a new disability identity. In this view, disability becomes a distinct minority community that has been excluded from full participation in society because of discrimination in education, employment, and architectural access. This community is not merely defined, though, in terms of shared experiences of discrimination, but by its vital subculture (including disability arts). Both of these models were deployed explicitly and implicitly in efforts to pass landmark civil rights legislation that began with Sections 501-504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and culminated in the Americans With Disabilities Act (or ADA) of 1990. These legislative coups would not have been possible without activists', artists', and scholars' insistence on new ways of considering disability.[11]

Performance has played a key role for both the disability community and the community at large in shifting the discourse from the medical model to the social construction/minority models. Disability studies scholar, Rosemarie Garland Thomson would place the social construction model squarely in the camp of "strategic constructionism," which "destigmatizes the disabled body, makes difference relative, denaturalizes so-called normalcy, and challenges appearance hierarchies".[12] Thomson suggests that disabled people also practice a kind of "strategic essentialism" through the minority model, which "validates individual experience and consciousness, imagines community, authorizes history, and facilitates self-naming".[13] Disabled performers have deployed both strategies. Solo performance artists such as Mary Duffy, Mike Lamitola, Cheryl Marie Wade, and Greg Walloch reject mainstream disability narratives that revolve around tragedy or inspiration; instead, their autobiographical performances tend to emphasize a coming to awareness of disability identity, explode disability stereotypes, flaunt bodily difference, and reflect "disability cool." Disability cool is a sense of pride in disability community, an often wickedly pointed inside humor, and a re-valuing of the particularities of disabled bodies' idiosyncrasies.[14] Victoria Ann Lewis's Other Voices workshops at the Mark Taper Forum, Joan Lipkin's Disability Project in Saint Louis, Terry Galloway's Actual Lives project in Austin, and disabled playwrights such as John Belusso and Susan Nussbaum are developing new performance pieces that deal with the day-to-day, lived experience of disability.

Deaf companies such as National Theatre of the Deaf have developed innovative performance techniques to make their work accessible to an integrated Deaf and hearing audience. Taken together, this explosion in theatrical activity presents evidence of a vibrant, generative disability culture movement in the moment of its self-definition.

I want to suggest, however, that this movement might make use of strategic essentialism in a way that Thomson does not address: a strategic essentialism based on the subjective, phenomenological experience of physical impairment. While disabled theatre artists have challenged dramaturgical *content* by dismantling oppressive narratives, few challenge theatrical *form*. This observation becomes apparent when comparing disability dramaturgy to disability dance. Dance companies such as the Bay area's Axis and Seattle's Light Motion are developing inventive choreography inspired by the way disabled people move and relate to space and, in turn, are changing dance itself. (I will return to dance and how it could influence theatrical performance later in this essay.)

Perhaps the reason why few disabled performers alter the fundamentals of theatrical form is because their work remains text based.[15] They tend to challenge traditional narratives with alternative narratives. In other words, most disabled performers are accommodating themselves to traditional forms rather than fundamentally altering them. This tactic makes sense when one considers that the disability civil rights movement prioritized gaining access to the mainstream and not necessarily transforming it.

But I think that this strategy will only take disabled people so far. As long as disabled people attempt to conform to established theatrical forms, I believe that we will always be considered "problems" to be dealt with rather than as an artistic constituency with unique offerings. To develop these offerings, we must pay attention to our impairments as well as our disabilities. Disabled people have made a clear distinction between impairment and disability, much like second-wave feminists detached sex from gender. Impairment, like sex, is rooted in biology and defined as the actual condition or physical manifestation of difference (some think of it as the "medical diagnosis"). Disability, like gender, is the social comportment of the body that develops from the impairment's social meaning and consequences. This separation between impairment and disability was a vital means of creating cross-impairment identification and a united front against similar oppressions. By this, I mean that a blind person and a person with cerebral palsy probably have very little in common in their experiences of impairment. What they do share is a common set of political and social goals. The designation "disabled" claimed by those with various impairments can be considered analogous to the designation "people of color" claimed by those from various racial and ethnic groups. Because disabled people have long focused on fighting discrimination and developing community, we have been reluctant to discuss our personal impairments with the outside world and even amongst ourselves.

But the pendulum is beginning to swing the other way, now, as we realize that our subjective experiences of impairment are an untapped resource, and that hiding those experiences may be another way of oppressing our difference. Just as gender theorists are finding ways to describe the mutual dependence of gender and sex without devolving into biological essentialism, disabled people are tentatively beginning to discuss how impairment is constitutive of disability. This issue surfaces time and time again, for example, at Society for Disability Studies (SDS) annual conferences. Redressing the impairment-disability divide was also much discussed during the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute on Disability Studies at San Francisco State University I attended in 2000.[16] The first of its kind, this five-week interdisciplinary Institute brought together scholars and artists from across the country to advance the emerging field of disability studies in the humanities. We discussed how impairment is often only described in terms of suffering and limitation, but how it is much more than that: it is a different way of operating in and experiencing the world. What does the body know through impairment? While each of us had his or her own answer to this question, a consensus formed around the need to bring subjective bodily experience back into the study and performance of disability.

As with any new theory, we needed new jargon, which we attempted to develop at the Institute. We needed to find a way to consider disability that also included impairment. While we did not come up with any definitive terms, I found a couple of the suggestions particularly provocative. Rosemarie Garland Thomson suggested we use the term "condition," which not only connotes a medical diagnosis, but also a "state of being" that is provisional, not necessarily positive or negative, but that influences every aspect of our lives. Historian of medicine, Sandy Sufian, suggested that we think of the disability/impairment intersection as a kind of "orientation" toward time and space. This definition coincides with Simi Linton's suggestion that disability is

> an account of a world negotiated from the vantage point of the atypical. Although the dominant culture describes that atypical experience as deficit and loss, the disabled community's narrative recounts it in more complex ways. The cultural stuff of the community is the creative response to atypical experience, the adaptive maneuvers through a world configured for nondisabled people.[17]

Considering disability as a condition, orientation, and vantage point has allowed me to articulate some very real ways in which bodies with disabilities can suggest a reconfiguration of theatrical space.

If disability is fundamentally a disjuncture between a body and an environment, then how might space be fundamentally remodeled from the vantage point of the atypical? How might our "adaptive maneuvers" be related to alternative aesthetic choices? I am not thinking in terms of "accommodation," meaning making modifications of the norm for the exceptional body (such as removing house seats to allow for a couple of wheelchair-using audience members or even building a ramp to the stage); such changes do little to alter the aesthetics and use of a space. The Americans with Disabilities Act has required public accommodation of disabled people, but in reality most theatres have provided accommodation only to the letter of the law (in the best circumstances), yet have done little to alter space to be more broadly inclusive. What if space were reconceptualized with human variety and people from the whole life-span taken into consideration?[18] How might consideration of disability transform the aesthetics and use of theatrical space altogether?[19]

Altering the Ideology of Theatrical Space

First and foremost, a consideration of disability in a theatrical environment (such as a typical proscenium, thrust, or even black box space) starkly reveals the ideology encoded there. All spaces are inherently ideological. At the Institute, religious studies scholar Nancy Eiesland explained that one can learn about which bodies are considered sacred and which are not by analyzing holy spaces. Certain spaces are designated as sacred and only certain bodies are allowed there. The layout of physical space tells us who is in it and who can participate and at what levels. Spaces also have controlled access, dictating the power relationships based on who can and cannot enter where.[20] Even in the liberal Unitarian-Universalist church that I attend, which prides itself on being open to anyone "whatever your physical ability," sends strong, ablist messages to the congregants. Our minister may be an out lesbian and congregants share power by leading one service a month, but the sanctuary's layout belies the church's claims to inclusivity. The dais is not accessible by wheelchair and the altar is bolted down so a short adult or child can not be seen from the designated speaking point. The seating in the sanctuary, though, is flexible, with individual chairs that can be arranged in any configuration. What this space tells me is that while disabled people can be accommodated in the congregation, the sacred position from which one can speak is reserved for the adult able bodied.

Given the contemporary theatre's historical roots in ecclesiastical performance, it is hardly surprising that many of our performance spaces, even the most liberal and inclusive ones, send the same message as my church does to disabled people. Our performance spaces tell everyone present (and even those absent) which bodies are considered sacred and which bodies can participate at which levels. In most theatres, audience spaces have been made minimally accessible, but the stage, backstage, rehearsal halls, lighting booth, box office, costume shop, and scene shop are usually not. Most academic, professional, and community theatres send a clear message to people with disabilities: you may be an observer, but you are not wanted in the sacred stage space. Even this message is not always sent. Often, our performances are only accessible to those with full hearing capacity or to those who can be accommodated through the use of an assisted listening device such as a hearing aid or other form of amplification.

Stage space is also an important site of public discourse, where our cultural values are represented and often interrogated. The configuration of our performance spaces communicate that only able bodies are granted the privilege to represent others, even characters with disabilities. Many of the performing artists I cited at the beginning of this essay were denied admission to professional actor training programs because their bodies were considered inappropriate for the stage. Victoria Ann Lewis, for example, was denied admission to acting training programs in the pre-ADA 1960s, but got her training in people's theatre companies, including the San Francisco Mime Troupe, that performed in alternative spaces. Lewis does not use a wheelchair; the sacred space of the stage was not a literal barrier for her but a figurative one. Her disabled body was considered too profane for the stage. She was denied admission to acting programs on the basis that she would never be hired.[21]

Without disability access, disabled people literally cannot enter certain spaces, even when granted "permission." Architectural and transportation access was made central to the ADA for this reason. As one ADA slogan put it: "The ADA: to boldly go where everyone else has gone before."[22] Indeed, the ADA has already affected our lived environment in the past decade. Ramps, curbcuts, bus lifts, automatic doors, widened doors, and elevators have reconfigured public space to be minimally inclusive. What might our theatre look like if we went beyond the minimum so that disabled artists could fully and boldly participate? Taking disability into consideration would first entail creating barrier-free spaces open to a variety of bodies both in the house, on the stage, and in all backstage areas. Such an environment would immediately alter the space's ideology, making the environment welcoming to innovative and genuine input by disabled artists and meaningful participation by disabled audience members.

Bodies, Space, and Language

If disabled bodies were to participate fully in our theatres, we would not only alter the ideology of our performing space, but we would be serve as a model for change to the larger social order. Choreographer Ann Cooper Albright suggests that considering disability can "radically refigure how we look at, conceive of, and organize bodies in the twenty-first century."[23] After all, the body itself is a primary model by which we organize our social spaces. Judith Abrams points out that the "human body often serves as an explicit, or implicit, metaphor for society and its values and beliefs."[24] At the Institute, Eiesland also described how the body's multiple parts and differentiation, complex interactive systems, boundaries, and senses serve as metaphors for the organization of social space.[25] Thus, as we expand our idea of what makes up a representable body, we expand our idea of how to arrange space itself.

As people with disabilities enter public discourse, the means of communication necessarily changes, which in turn changes how we configure our use of a space.[26] For example, when people with disabilities gather in a conference-like setting, we often rearrange the space to facilitate conversation. Public space is usually arranged on the phenomenological experiences of two hearing and seeing bodies in communication with one another. A conference meeting, a theatre space, or a church are all arranged so that one body faces another body with an imaginary line or boundary dividing the two into a performing space and an audience space. Communication is usually bi-directional, with one person speaking and the other listening with the option of reversing this dynamic. Even when groups of people occupy either side of the line, the communication remains bi-directional with messages being sent across the divide visually and orally. Most often, those on the performance side of the divide hold most of the power as those who have come to the audience space are expected to yield focus to those on the performance side.

Oftentimes in disability contexts, it is not enough for a speaker to stand at a podium and deliver. The line between performance and audience space becomes more fluid, intermediary people or devices sometimes collaborate with those on both sides of the divide to channel messages, and language becomes multidimensional. Those of us who are unable to use our mouths to speak may use an interpreter, alphabet board, or computer voice. Making sure that everyone receives the message is just as much a priority as who is allowed to be in the performance space. That those on either side of the divide can hear and see is not taken for granted. When nondisabled minority groups claim that they have no "voice," they usually mean that they have not been granted authority to speak from the performance side of the divide. The disability community is accutely aware of both the politics of voice and the politics of hearing. "Silencing" a minority voice is not only a matter of disallowing speech, but disallowing hearing.

Often communication is accomplished cooperatively to facilitate multiple ways of speaking and hearing. A speaker might be working with several sign language interpreters in a large space. To the side of the speaker might be a screen onto which real-time captioning of the conversation may be projected. FM loops might broadcast the information into amplifying hearing devices. Audio-descriptionists might describe the visual scene to the blind. Some may be reading a transcript in Braille. Perhaps an interpreter is signing the conversations into the hands and arms of a deaf-blind person. In these environments, a speaker is not solely responsible for communicating his or her words: spoken language becomes three-dimensional as it is dispersed in a variety of ways, and each participant in the conversation must work together to get the meaning across. Verbal language becomes spatial, physical, and collective, not just aural and individual. Instead of space being arranged on the model of autonomous individuals communicating across a divide, space is arranged for "continuous bodies" linked in a web. What would a theatre space based on this web model be like?

Lest my above description seem utopic, I must confess that the web model of communication is not without major challenges. In a group of disabled people, we often must confront "competing accommodations" that seem to be incompatible and must be negotiated. For instance, a visually impaired person may need bright lights for best vision while at the same time a hard of hearing person may need the lights dimmed to read the real-time captioning screen. The presence of a guide dog may make the air unbreathable for someone with severe environmental illness. A person with autism may be overwhelmed by multidimensional communication channels. In disability contexts, such situations arise frequently, and we are not always successful at negotiating the space and communication channels effectively. But what I find remarkable about disability community is the intention and effort to include all of the people to the fullest extent possible, not just most of the people when convenient. Prior to a communication event, presenters often initiate a brief negotiation of which accommodations and channels will be used, and the space is rearranged before beginning.

Most mainstream performance spaces do not alter their events to fit a variety of bodies, but expect the disabled audience members to adjust to a fixed environment. The means of performance rarely changes. Theatres may provide a sign interpreter as an "add-on" or provide assisted hearing devices, but rarely do theatre artists think about ways to disperse language into space through multiple channels or re-configure the space radically to facilitate communication.

While disabled audience members can participate in the theatrical event if they have access to accommodations, accommodations for disabled *performers* rarely happen; those disabled people who are integrated as performers are often those who can "pass" (the "able-disabled"), or those whose disabilities do not require accommodation. In disability contexts, innovative use of space for both the performer and audience members becomes part of the communication aesthetic rather than an awkward appendage.[27]

That language is spatial as well as aural/oral and textual is no news to many disabled people. Theatre performed in American Sign Language (ASL), ASL poetry, and Deaf storytelling require the continuous active engagement of the entire body to communicate. This active engagement goes far beyond the "body language" used in realistic acting. Language is deployed by bodies making shapes in space (like dance, but ASL has more clearly defined meanings than connotative dance gestures do). Such use of space challenges realistic acting styles. Rarely do performers in these genre seamlessly meld with character. Instead, as Brenda Brueggemann explains, in ASL poetry, the "poet not only becomes like a painter, but is the painter in action."[28] She describes scenes "when the poet is both 'the painter and the portrait,' painting (and transforming) both the canvas, then self, then self into canvas, canvas into self, canvas into object drawn, self into that object, object back to canvas [. . .] a breathtaking whirl of being and becoming."[29] Even actors who are not proficient in ASL or likely to become involved in Deaf performance genres can learn a new kinesthesia in language from Deaf performing artists.

Acting programs routinely use Asian martial arts, yoga, or mask work to train actors. Why not incorporate Deaf performance techniques in our programs to unleash the expressive potential of all of our actors' bodies? Brueggemann explains that Deaf poetry has an "emphasis on presence, participation, performance, immanence, activity, embodied energy, and creation, juxtaposed against sheer objectification" (214). These qualities are key for any performer, and hearing performers can enhance these qualities by studying techniques developed by Deaf performers. In the spring of 1999, Deaf solo performance artist, Mike Lamitola, provided a workshop for hearing acting students at Florida State University. Lamitola worked with the students, who have been trained mostly in the American Method, in the conventions of Deaf storytelling. He explained that Deaf storytellers use their bodies like film cameras, panning the scene as well as providing long shots and close shots of characters. When introducing characters, first a sign is used to signify the overall shape of character, then a smaller identifying detail is signed, and finally the character's attitude is portrayed. Even though students did not tell stories using ASL but rather used body movements, gestures, and facial expressions, they were able to communicate complex stories. The students were extremely enthusiastic about what they had learned and reported that the expressiveness they developed in the workshop translated to more nuanced and detailed movement in their realistic acting.

Perspective and Movement

While disabled bodies in communication with one another might serve as a metaphor for spatializing spoken language, we might also consider how certain disability conditions alter human relationships to space. Standpoint has been used by critical theorists as a geographic metaphor. Thomson suggested at the Institute that standpoint may be a perspectival metaphor as well.[30] As Linton puts it:

> One research domain that is yet to be fully explored from the perspective of disabled people is the kinesthetic, proprioceptive, sensory, and cognitive experiences of people with an array of

> disabilities. For instance, because I use a wheelchair, I utilize my upper body for mobility and rock back and forth as I propel myself forward. My height when I am vertical differs from my measured height horizontally, and my impairment influences my height relative to objects in the world and to other people. Each of these experiences has an impact on my sense of my body in space and affects the information I am exposed to and the way I process sensory information.[31]

Exploring these phenomenological experiences can suggest new movement vocabularies and portray views of the world not normally seen in the theatre.

People with disabilities often describe mobility devices such as braces, canes, and wheelchairs as extensions of the body that alter range of motion and perspective, while mainstream representation uses these devices as symbols of defeat, limitation, or psychological weakness (as revealed in the colloquialisms "confined to a wheelchair" or "relying on a crutch"). Dancer Charlene Curtis says that when she choreographs, the wheelchair and the wheel are important visuals; she attempts to portray in her dances the feeling of liberation when body melds with chair gliding through space. She does not think of the chair as a separate entity. The chair is more than a tool to move a body from point A to point B, but an extension of the self that has expressive, artistic qualities. Through her choreography, she consciously explores the meaning of the chair as an extension of herself and how to express that relationship through movement.[32] Dancers also move their bodies in and out of their chairs, exploring the different qualities of movement in different spaces: lower bodies heavy on the ground being pulled along by the upper body, or bodies soaring on trapezes with the inert weight of the lower body providing momentum. Disabled bodies give mixed meanings to different dimensions of space, breaking up associations of upwardness with lightness and downwardness with heaviness. Heaviness and lightness exist simultaneously in the air and on the ground.

Symmetry

Disabled bodies also challenge certain aesthetic values of space, namely symmetry. Our often asymmetrical bodies and movement patterns can provide stark contrast and a visual commentary on the cultural valuation of symmetry as a component of the beautiful. Performance artist Mary Duffy, for example, draws attention to her asymmetrical body as a means of challenging the medical establishment's endless efforts to normalize her. In one performance, she positions her spotlit nude body against a starkly square, black, velveteen backdrop. Her alabaster skin and body positioning recalls a museum exhibit of classical statuary, a living Venus de Milo, but with a difference.

Duffy was born without arms (making her not so different-looking—actually—from classical statuary), but off one shoulder she has one small appendage and off the other a partially formed hand. Throughout her monologue, she maintains her body in the same pose, but shifts the position of her head to emphasize certain points. At times she looks demurely to the side, at other times she meets the audience's gaze. She recounts how her idiosyncratic way of using her body (for example using her feet instead of her hands to perform many functions) was considered pathological and unacceptable by a medical profession that continually tried to fit her with awkward prosthetic arms. She says, "I felt, even in the face of such opposition, that my body was the way it was supposed to be. It was right for me, as well as being whole, complete, and functional." She explains that her impairment was not handicapping to her but instead was "[the] oppression of constantly trying to be fixed, to be changed, to be made more whole, less visible, to hide and to be hidden." Her performance highlights the arbitrariness of the ways in which our culture assigns value to shape by contrasting her asymmetry to the symmetrical space.[33]

Time

Disabled people's relationship to time might also alter the ways in which we think about and therefore use space. Sufian, who as I wrote earlier described disability as an orientation to time and space at the Institute, offered that disabled people often plan the use of time very deliberately: sometimes to conserve energy or minimize pain and bodily wear and tear. Prognosis of terminal illness alters the perception of time, which can be expressed through use of space. Bill T. Jones's dance piece *Still/Here* could be analyzed in this context. Jones, who is HIV positive, wanted to collaborate with people who were terminally ill in performance workshops to create a piece that would express the experience of confronting one's mortality. Jones abstracted what he learned through words, music, and movement. The resulting piece included choreography based on the movement and expressions of people dealing with a specific relationship to space and time.

Disabled people's conception of time and space can differ due to unique physical surroundings and the different pace at which we achieve certain developmental milestones. Time spent in an iron lung, for instance, may seem the ultimate claustrophobic nightmare, but as historian Daniel Wilson said at the Institute, an iron lung is like a comforting womb, and weaning oneself off of it can be nightmarish. In a poem that Eli Clare often performs, she explains how because of her cerebral palsy, she has a different relationship to her body and speech. She says in a slow, deliberate way, "I practiced the sounds 'TH' 'SH' and 'SL' for years, a pianist playing endless hours of scales, I had to learn the muscle of my tongue."[34] Disabled people may experience space and time differently from the nondisabled due to the way our bodies are disciplined to match social norms.

A Manifesto

If this essay has read like a manifesto, that is because it is. My goal has been to suggest that disability art and culture have much to offer current theatre practices. Even this cursory examination of the poetry, prose, and performance by disabled people reveals how the phenomenological experience of impairment shapes the ways in which we experience the world and make art. Though most of my musings here have only imagined the ways in which theatre might be transformed by considering disability, I hope that I have, too, provided enough concrete examples to illustrate that what I have imagined here for the theatre at large is already happening in disability communities around the world. Reconsidering disability as an aspect of human diversity rather than a pathological aberration can open up theatre aesthetics to new possibilities and new communities.[35]

Notes

1. Nancy Mairs, "Carnal Acts," in *Staring Back: The Disability Experience from the Inside Out, ed. Kenny Fries* (New York: Plume, 1997) 51.

2. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983) 64.

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962).

4. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 3.

5. For information about disability's use as a dramaturgical device, see Hevey; Lewis; and Carrie Sandahl, "Ahhhh Freak Out! Metaphors of Disability and Femaleness in Performance," *Theatre Topics* 9.1 (1999): 11-30.

6. David Hevey, *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 54.

7. Hevey 58.

8. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000).

9. Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York UP, 1998).

10. I specify that these models are US-based as similar terms are understood very differently by UK-based disability scholars.

11. See Linton; Doris Zames Fleischer and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001); and Joseph Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Times Books/Random House, 1993) for full discussions of this paradigm shift and its relationship to the disability civil rights movement.

12. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 23.

13. Thomson 23. Thomson is applying these terms to disability, feminist terms which she borrows from Diana Fuss's *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge,

1989).

14. See Lewis for a fuller description of disability dramaturgy, especially disabled performers' use of disability cool.

15. See Victoria Ann Lewis "Dramaturgy of Disability," *Points of Contact: Disability, Art, and Culture*, ed. Susan Crutchfield and Marcy Epstein (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000) 93-108 for an exception to this observation on Deaf Theatre, which has radically configured theatrical form. I will address these innovations later in the essay.

16. This Institute was organized by Paul Longmore and Rosemarie Garland Thomson. I would like to thank them for an experience that has fundamentally influenced my thinking about disability and for the opportunity to study with other disabled scholars, as most of us work on these issues in isolation.

17. Linton 5.

18. Adrienne Asch asked this question at the Gender and Disability conference at Rutgers University in 2001. She explained in her keynote address that institutions deal with a very narrow range of human ability when constructing their environments. She called for an end to discussion of "special accommodation" and suggested that we should be designing spaces intended for the variety of physical and emotional changes humans experience over time. She suggested that environments need to be more flexible overall. Architects have termed such practice "universal design."

19. While thinking about impairment is crucial to this discussion, it is important to remember that our experiences of impairment take place in the context of an industrialized, capitalist culture, which demands adherence to certain notions of efficiency, standardization, and productivity. Entire fields of medicine and industry have been set up to normalize as much as possible our movement, speech, and behavioral patterns so that disabled people are "efficient" enough to be employable, productive members of mainstream society. I am not suggesting that these fields have nothing to offer people with disabilities, but often they tend to ignore the subjective experiences of disabled people who may feel that their bodies and functions are sufficient, that their ways of being represent alternatives not pathologies. For example, it is only within hearing culture that relies on the spoken word for communication that deafness can be considered a liability. Or, it is only within a culture that equates time with money that a slower gait or slower reading time can be considered a disadvantage. Or, it is only in a culture that values conformity and standardization that eating with one's feet rather than with one's hands can be rendered unacceptable.

20. Eisland's comments crystalized points made in Abrams. Abrams' history of the disabled in Judaism points out that early Jewish priests were required to be "unblemished."

21. See the April 2001 issue of *American Theatre* magazine for Lewis's article on disability and professional actor training.

22. Paul Longmore shared this slogan with me.

23. Ann Cooper Albright, "Strategic Abilities: Negotiating the Disabled Body in Dance," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 37.2 (1998): 482.

24. Judith Z. Abrams, *Judaism and Disability: Portrayals in Ancient Texts from the Tanach through the Bayli* (Washington DC: Gallaudet UP, 1998) 73.

25. Both Abrams and Eisland here draw on the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson as well

as Mary Douglas.

26. I would like to thank my colleague Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren for pointing this out to me.

27. Georgina Kleege writes a compelling account of language as cooperative in her memoir *Sight Unseen* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999). As a blind woman, Kleege often reads by listening to pre-recorded versions of text, live readers, or computer readers. In each of these instances, reading becomes a collaborative and dynamic performance instead of a lone interaction between a person and static text. Kleege has a chapter in her the memoir entitled "Blind Phenomenology" in which she articulates exactly how and what she sees. Her book is a model for thinking of disability as phenomenological.

28. Brenda Brueggemann, *Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness* (Washington DC: Gallaudet UP, 1999) 202.

29. Brueggemann 215.

30. Thomson made this remark at the NEH Summer Institute.

31. Linton 140.

32. "People in Motion," dir., prod. and writ. Lyn Goldfarb, PBS, WNET, New York, 1994.

33. This performance was documented in the award-winning video, *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back*, dir. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, Brace Yourself Productions, 1996. The title of the performance was not listed in the credits.

34. Clare's poem is also featured in *Vital Signs*.

35. The ideas presented in this manifesto have been tried out in various contexts. I would like to acknowledge my colleagues at the Association for Theatre and Higher Education and the Society for Disability Studies for commenting on earlier drafts of this essay. In particular, James Ferris, Simi Linton, Georgina Kleege, Kanta Kochher-Lindgren, Victoria Ann Lewis, Terry Galloway, and Sumi Colligan have shared invaluable conversations on this topic with me.