

Marxism and Disability

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Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation,
by Ato Quayson. New York: Columbia, 2007, 246 pp., US\$25.50,
ISBN 9780231139038.

Marx drew a relationship between physical disability and capitalism, pointing for example to “the victims of industry, whose number increases with the growth of dangerous machinery, of mines, chemical works, etc.”¹ But disability is more generally present in Marx as a trope, a metaphor for the effects of capitalism, particularly of the division of labor. Manufacture “converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity by furthering his particular skill as in a forcing-house, through the suppression of a whole world of productive drives and inclinations.”² This use of disability as metaphorical vehicle for the effects of the capitalist division of labor characterizes an ethical thread in Marxist thought, even among thinkers whose political horizon is decidedly elsewhere: it is a running theme in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, beginning with the subtitle “Reflections from Damaged Life”; one hears overtones of it in Jameson’s description of the “epistemologically crippling” experience of our first-world “view from the top”;³ even Lukács does not manage to escape the trope entirely when he wanders near Marx’s own description of industrial work. But the metaphor of modernity — particularly modernity under the aspect of specialization or segmentation — as disability is also part of the inheritance of German Idealism. In the sixth letter of Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, the emerging division of labor turns out to be the source of our “mutilated nature” and therefore of Schiller’s entire problematic: “we see not only individuals, but whole classes of men, developing but one part of their potentialities while of the rest, as in

stunted growths, only vestigial traces remain.”⁴ This metaphor, then, doesn’t necessarily belong specifically to Marxism, and we should probably treat it with skepticism wherever we find it. Even if Marx himself inherits this trope from classical German philosophy, his more substantial inheritance, the dialectical method, points unequivocally to the primordial disunity of the subject and offers no comforting appeal to normative wholeness and health. Certainly there are colder and more useful Marxist analyses of segmentation than such an appeal; the fact that three of them might be placed under the headings Lukács, Adorno, and Jameson might be an index of the vestigial nature of the disability trope itself within Marxism. However difficult it may be to avoid, its imputed other — the ideal of the fully developed personality — is not a particularly political horizon. “Bourgeois individualism” is a tired expression, but nonetheless one would not like to see what it names turn out to be the ethical motive of Marxism itself.

The connection of Ato Quayson’s *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* to Marxism is, then, different from all this. *Aesthetic Nervousness* — a chapter of which was presented by Quayson at the 2007 Institute on Culture and Society — contributes to that problem which goes by the banal term “intersectionality”: given all the ways people can be disadvantaged, oppressed, or exploited, and given the fact that these relationships seem all to exist at the same time, how can one think them together? But “intersectionality” is the name of a problem, not a solution, since the “intersection” is precisely what was to be theorized; if anything the term, implying that the relationship is a mere intersection, insists that it is therefore not to be theorized at all, rather at best quantified and calibrated in accordance with this or that situation. Fredric Jameson’s “*History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project*” (which has been refunctioned for queer theory by Kevin Floyd in his forthcoming book *Reifying Desire: Capital, Sexuality, Dialectic*), raises the startling prospect that an adequate theory of “intersectionality” is not to be achieved by repudiating Lukács’s privileging of class in favor of some more correct and nuanced intersectional account, but rather by repeating it: by producing the gendered body (the queer body, the black body, the colonized body, the disabled body) as a unique fulcrum for understanding the social totality.⁵

It is in this sense, in its commitment to thinking totality through the concept of disability, that *Aesthetic Nervousness* shares Marxism’s project. On Quayson’s (and my) understanding, totality is not a positive term but rather the negative condition of understanding. On the level of the literary text, this means that the text does not constitute a finite totality that can be entirely known in all its possible implications, internal connections, and registers; rather, it means that every apparently positive meaning in the text is

in fact structured by its relation to all of the other elements in the text, an open set of negative entities (i.e. relationships) that structure what then look like positive units of meaning. But this means, then, that in this book “disability” does not stand for a positive concept that we already understand before we get to the literary text, and this is what makes Quayson’s book so different from what it could be, another exercise in “representations of X in Y.” That “X,” disability, is not presumed here to be fixed in advance; in each case it is only intelligible within the system of relationships that constitutes the work of art.

Concretely, then, in each set of readings — Quayson takes on Samuel Beckett, Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, and J.M. Coetzee, a list that seems eclectic until one is reminded that they are all (coincidentally, as Quayson tells us, but their canonicity is not accidental) Nobel Prize winners — “disability” means something different, and this is entirely a good thing. One way of reading *Aesthetic Nervousness* is as not being about disability at all as a positive question, but rather as a reconstitution or recentering of each of these texts, forcing them to circulate in a different discourse than they had before and causing these utterly canonical and in varying degrees ossified texts suddenly to appear unfamiliar and strange. Quayson’s book had the unexpected effect of making me curious to read *The Life and Times of Michael K*. The dreary discourse of the unknowability of the other, while it refers to something real, is so banal that one has reason to be suspicious when it is treated as profound — what possibilities are we being distracted from when we are confronted with the silence of the other as though it were a great ethical discovery? — and when Quayson replaces it with a discussion of autism, Michael K. suddenly becomes quite a different kind of figure, even if, by the end of the chapter, Coetzee remains the beautiful soul he ever was.

Once Quayson draws our attention to the trope of disability — and this is another of the great strengths of this book — one suddenly realizes how ubiquitous it is. Just thinking of African drama, a field Quayson and I share an interest in, the examples begin to multiply. In Sembène Ousmane’s *Xala*, we remember that the lumpens who deliver the Hadj’s ultimate humiliation are marked by various disabilities. Similarly with Soyinka’s *Madmen and Specialists*, which opens, as Quayson reminds us, with a group of disabled mendicants playing dice for body parts: here we return to the trope we began with, which equates capitalism — or, in the Old Man’s idiolect in *Madmen and Specialists*, “system” — with maiming. (Of course, this equation, with mendicancy as the mediating term, reminds us immediately of Brecht, which gives some sense of the historical depth of this trope). Or one recalls Athol Fugard’s *Hello and Goodbye*, in which one of the protagonists, an able-

bodied Afrikaner, voluntarily assumes, in what is surely one of the most depressing scenes in theater, the disability of his dead father. In the metaphorical register, we are given to understand that this disability is Afrikaner identity itself, a wounded self-image that is nonetheless a source of pride; but Fugard is careful to let us discover that the father's literal wound, which is a source of pride for the father and becomes one for the son, is gained at the expense of African laborers who, excluded even from the dangerous labor that maimed the father, are left to starve.

The metaphorical vehicle in the last example is that of the crutch, the physical prop (in both meanings of the word) that plays a pivotal role in *Hello and Goodbye*. Disability is meant here to stand in for something else: Afrikaner history and identity as mutilation and crutch. But there is an elementary distinction to be made between disability as trope and disability as disability, and Quayson is admirably clear about this. In the course of this book Quayson teaches us to be suspicious of the oversignification that would ascribe metaphorical meaning to real disabilities, and one surely sees the ethical charge of this suspicion. But something peculiar seems to happen around disability within the literary text: the vehicle itself actually does what it is supposed to do and imputes some quality to the tenor. Like disability (and indeed, like anything else), gender, race, and sexuality can be tropes. But in these cases — and this was the whole point of that dismal genre of “representations of X in Y” criticism — tenor and vehicle are free to oscillate back and forth, the qualities imputed to the tenor reverberating back to confirm the qualities derived from the vehicle. “This old ninny-woman, fate” says something about fate, but also about women. Race is always a trope in Faulkner, of course: but race is also race, and if you don't understand that you're missing something essential about Faulkner. (Achebe made essentially this same point about Conrad). Possibly because disability does not have a stable place in the symbolic order — this is a source of the “aesthetic nervousness” Quayson so persuasively delineates — the metaphor of disability is not always already a confirmation of a stereotype that it presupposes. “History is a wound,” or even “assuming an identity is choosing to be disabled” do not work quite the same way as “fate is a woman”; one doesn't then expect the negative overtones of the metaphor secretly to confirm our ideas about people who use crutches. In something like *Hello and Goodbye*, are we even talking about a representation of disability, or does disability here function purely as a trope? In other words, when we're talking about disability in literature are we necessarily talking about disability — or is it always possible that we are talking about something different?

In fact, this view of the trope of disability plays into one of the strengths of this book: as we said a moment ago, when Quayson is talking about

disability, he *is* always talking about something different. But then, how useful is the category of disability itself? First, how trans-historical is it? Are the kinds of bodily or genetic difference that count for us as “disability” usefully understood under that category in other places and times? One might think of Oedipus's foot, which Lévi-Strauss associated with a myth of autochthony. Is this disability? Quayson endorses a “social model of disability”: it is not the person, but rather society which is disabled. This is a useful dialectical reversal. But it opens up the category to radical relativization. If we take the social model of disability in the broadest sense, we might be led, circuitously, back to Marx, and to identify capitalism with disabled society in a new sense. It is only when social being is equated with labor power, with the ability to perform economically productive work — a relatively recent development and one which even now is not universal — that “disability” can come to mean what it means for us.

Second, how does the tropological understanding of disability interact with disability itself which, if we understand it in the strongest social sense, could be eliminated tomorrow? In a socialist order, if we can still imagine such a thing, all kinds of prejudices might remain, but the idea of disability becomes incoherent: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” (Under Stalin, the final word in Marx's slogan was, symptomatically, altered to “work”).⁶ The social model of disability has, at its core, a Utopian message akin to Marx's. But does an understanding of the trope of disability get us any closer to realizing it?

Quayson ends with a discussion of Ghana's Persons with Disability Act, an important piece of progressive legislation that passed only after a twelve-year struggle. Are we to celebrate this accomplishment with him? Yes, of course. And are we to celebrate books like this one, which refocus our attention by brilliantly outlining the pathways by which a certain set of tropes comes to signify? Yes, of course. But does the second goal have much to do with the first? Quayson himself approaches this question in the final chapter — with admirable honesty and possibly some uneasiness — but that shouldn't prevent us from posing it ourselves. I remain agnostic, but ready to be convinced.

Notes

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976) 797.

² *Capital* I, 481.

³ Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 85.

⁴ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967) 43, 33.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, "History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project," *Rethinking Marxism* 1.1 (1988) 49-72; Kevin Floyd, *Reifying Desire: Capital, Sexuality, Dialectic* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, forthcoming).

⁶ The fuller story: this Utopian slogan is cited from Marx's "Critique of the Gotha Program" (*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd Edition, ed. Robert C Tucker [New York: Norton, 1978] 531). It is reworked by Lenin, in "The State and Revolution," into the theory of stages: to each according to his needs, yes, that is communism; but for now, socialism: "every worker ... receives from society as much as he has given it" (*Essential Works of Lenin*, ed. Henry M Christman [New York: Bantam, 1966] 341). Fatefully, this branch of the theory of revolution, which we must remember was opened up in a moment of radical historical openness and uncertainty, is then codified in Stalin's 1936 Constitution: "The principle applied in the USSR is that of socialism: 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his work'" (Article 12: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1936/12/05.htm>). Under "socialism" thus understood, disability remains, like so much else, untransfigured.

Marxism and Disability. Article Â· January 2008 with 58 Reads. How we measure 'reads'.Â· Nicholas Brown reviews Ato Quayson's Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation. Quayson's most recent book is both brilliant in its literary analyses and ethically acute in its discussion of disability. But how do these two moments, the textual and the ethical, relate to each other? Do you want to read the rest of this article? IF FOR no other reason, Roddy Slorach's A Very Capitalist Condition is remarkable for helping bridge the gap between Marxism and disability studies. Other writers have contributed groundbreaking journal-length articles and individual chapters that have advanced a Marxist analysis of the phenomenon of disability and disability oppression. But Slorach is the first to offer a comprehensive, book-length historical materialist treatment of the history, theory and politics of disability.