Review Essay

Disability History: Why We Need Another "Other"

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Not since Joan Wallach Scott heralded a new age with her “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” have historians faced such an exciting time to rethink what we do. Over the past two decades, our cousins in anthropology and literature have produced essays and monographs dealing with disability as a historical subject. The fields that blazed the trail for studying race, gender, and sexuality while introducing postmodernism and the linguistic turn have provided valuable analytic and theoretical tools for exploring this new Other. Now the work

Many colleagues and students provided references, clarifications, and comments, making this a truly collaborative effort. Since it would take pages to list my intellectual debts, I can only single out the anonymous readers and those who could practically be co-authors because they read this essay in so many incarnations: Paul Longmore, Susan Mann, Mark Sherry, and John Vickrey Van Cleve. Special thanks also to Baki Tezcan for putting the right book in my hand at the right time. Named and unnamed, please accept my deepest thanks. I apologize for any omissions or inaccuracies, which are inevitable in such a task.

1 Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in Gender and the Politics of History (New York, 1999), 28–52; originally published in AHR 91 (December 1986): 1053–75.
of more and more historians—some who have been studying disability for decades, others who have been doing it without consciously describing it this way, still others recently inspired by different disciplines—is beginning to bear fruit in the form of a fresh area of inquiry that could well reshape our scholarly landscape. One need not identify oneself as disabled in order to reap the benefits of this up-and-coming field. Rather, the books introduced below help historians ask and attempt to answer the overarching questions central to our mission as scholars and teachers in a humanistic discipline: what does it mean to be human? How can we respond ethically to difference? What is the value of a human life? Who decides these questions, and what do the answers reveal?

Much of the new work springs from disability studies, an interdisciplinary field dating from the mid-1980s that invites scholars to think about disability not as an isolated, individual medical pathology but instead as a key defining social category on a par with race, class, and gender. “Disability studies takes for its subject matter...
not simply the variations that exist in human behavior, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive processing, but, more crucially, the meaning we make of those variations," Simi Linton explains in her influential 1998 manifesto *Claiming Disability*. "It is an interdisciplinary field based on a socio-political analysis of disability and informed both by the knowledge base and methodologies used in the traditional liberal arts, and by conceptualizations and approaches developed in areas of the new scholarship." By approaching disability as a social category rather than as an individual characteristic, the field challenges long-held perceptions that relegate it to the unglamorous backwaters primarily of interest to people in rehabilitation, special education, and other applied professional fields.

Seen in this way, disability should sit squarely at the center of historical inquiry, both as a subject worth studying in its own right and as one that will provide scholars with a new analytic tool for exploring power itself. Indeed, the books discussed here represent only the beginning of a greater project that will reveal disability as crucial for understanding how Western cultures determine hierarchies and maintain social order as well as how they define progress. For the United States and Western Europe—the most widely studied areas in this very new field—it might even be argued that hierarchy depends on the threat of disability always lurking as the ultimate living catastrophe. How else might we account for the prevalence of so many metaphors across times and places that derive rhetorical force from disabling conditions? For example, in 1558, John Knox’s “First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women” (a pamphlet containing sixteen references to blindness and numerous others to madness, along with the ubiquitous “monstrous”) drew on ancient scriptures to inform the English-speaking world that women should not rule. Two and a half centuries later, writers with opinions as diverse as Edmund Burke and Tom Paine would rely on often identical monstrous metaphors to malign those they wished to attack. Even the most basic look at narratives of modern European history conveys notions of degeneracy, defectiveness, and decline steeped in images of idiocy and deformity attributed to crowds, anarchists, mass democracy, Jews, women, homosexuals, corrupt politicians, the French, the English, the Germans, the Italians . . . With a slight twist, Europeans used similar images to

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7 John Knox, “The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women,” 1558.

8 Douglas C. Baynton, “Disability and the Justification for Inequality in American History,” in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, eds., *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York, 2001), 34–35. An intellectual historian, Baynton offers the best blend of history and theory to explore disability’s place within larger historical contexts, and I owe much of this discussion to what I have learned from him. His book *Forbidden Signs* also explores valuable “cross-over” ground between disability and concepts more familiar to non-disability historians. In addition, I have greatly benefited from the insights of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her *Extraordinary Bodies*, esp. 5–51.

allege their superiority over what would become known as "lesser-developed" nations.\textsuperscript{10}

Such condemnations were more than mere rhetoric; oppressors used them and their implicit threat of incapacity to wield power, while the oppressed themselves appropriated negative views of disability to fight back. Disability worked as a critique of the social body in large part because classical thinkers such as Aristotle had established a particular understanding of the perfect human body. This father of Western taxonomy and later political thought saw "imperfect bodies"—notably women's but also those of "anyone who does not take after his parents"—as "deformed," "mutilated," "monstrous," "deviant," all synonyms for disability today.\textsuperscript{11} The specter of disability also came through in religious writings and eventually would underpin scientific notions of progress and evolution's "survival of the fittest."\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, Western nations embraced capitalism, a system predicated on able-bodied ideals of independence, strength, control, self-mastery, and struggle.

Douglas Baynton's pathbreaking essay, "Disability and the Justification for Inequality in American History," shows how in the United States opponents of suffragists, abolitionists, and immigration all used disability to discredit undesirable groups' claims to citizenship, while women, African Americans, and immigrants bristled at being associated with disability.\textsuperscript{13} The centrality of this concept to power, hierarchy, and social order raises intriguing comparative questions for cultures outside the United States and Europe, especially in light of initial research that suggests that not all cultures have seen the same impairments as disabling.\textsuperscript{14}

Viewed in such protean terms, the field offers possibilities for intellectual exploration that will appeal to a variety of scholarly tastes. For political and policy historians, disability is a significant factor in the development of the modern state, by raising questions of who deserves the government's assistance and protection, what constitutes a capable citizen, and who merits the full rights of citizenship. For labor historians, it suggests ways of exploring assumptions about work, strength, productivity, and tensions between solidarity and individuality. Anyone interested in subjects as diverse as war, the body, the senses, aging, medicine, beauty,
aesthetics, or technology will find ways of making the familiar refreshingly unfamiliar again. Just as gender and race have had an impact well beyond women and people of color, disability is so vast in its economic, social, political, cultural, religious, legal, philosophical, artistic, moral, and medical import that it can force historians to reconsider virtually every concept, every event, every “given” we have taken for granted.

The breadth of this new field—indeed, the problem that makes it so rich and interesting—stems from the fact that the term “disability” defies easy definition. No clear consensus has emerged perhaps because human bodies and the societies they live in are by nature unstable. As numerous court battles have shown, even the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), designed to be multivalent, leaves intentional room for interpretation: “The term ‘disability’ means, with respect to an individual: (A) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; (B) a record of such an impairment; or (C) being regarded as having such an impairment.” Making an observation that could prove useful to historians, activist Mary Johnson emphasizes the subjectivity inherent in such a definition, explaining that “‘disabled’ is in the final analysis a political or a moral judgement, based not on anything about the individual in question so much as the viewer’s own perception and attitudes about the way society should function.” The diverse sampling of books discussed below will thus introduce readers to blind and deaf people, freak show performers, wounded veterans, patients with Tourette’s Syndrome and autism, and users of artificial limbs. We also meet teachers, researchers, bureaucrats, journalists, physicians, artists, clerics, anthropologists, advertisers, and activists, each striving to change the lives of the above groups in some way, and therefore inadvertently working to define disability in a collective sense. Here we have an impressive variety of topics and approaches as well as a category that in essence is commonplace, even seen as natural, yet treated as inherently abnormal. Thus its very ambiguity and changing meanings open up uncharted areas of research and modes of analysis, which in turn will bring about a greater understanding of disability and its repercussions.

In light of these sweeping implications, it is curious that disability did not capture historians’ attention sooner. Certainly, in terms of raw numbers and lived experience, it occupies a place comparable to gender and race in defining the human condition. According to the University of California San Francisco’s Disability Statistics Center, at present nearly one fifth (19.7 percent) of Americans qualify as people with disabilities, while some sources place the number even higher. Ironically, the ranks of disabled people will grow further as medicine...
advances, because, as more people will be able to survive longer, they can be expected to acquire impairments that worsen with age. Meanwhile, in the past decade, researchers have been discovering and labeling new conditions with astonishing speed.\(^{19}\) Even those who do not have a disability know relatives, friends, or colleagues who do. Moreover, we all encounter or think we encounter disability at some point in our lives because we acquire temporary impairments or have experiences described as “disabling.” To be sure, such visits only scratch the surface of living with a chronic condition and fail to introduce people to the real problems posed by social and economic environments that compound, often even outweigh, the physical challenges. Still, they alert us to the porous boundaries between disability and apparent health. More significant, disability cuts across all races, classes, genders, nationalities, and generations because it can potentially happen to anyone at any time: an accident, a degenerative disease of the limbs, eyes, ears, or nervous system, can instantly transport someone into a new category of existence, a fact some activists underscore by referring to non-disabled people as “temporarily able bodied” or “TABS.”\(^{20}\)

The field of disability studies faces hurdles—some of them personal, some intellectual, some institutional—that could prompt historians to explore the roots and mechanisms of how societies function in new ways. Unlike racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, disabled people experience attacks cloaked in pity accompanied by a widely held perception that no one wishes them ill. Yet while people in many other marginal groups have campaigned with some success to change their public image, disability carries a negative social charge still supported by dominant cultural assumptions across the economic, political, and intellectual spectrum.\(^{21}\) The demeaning ideas and representations are everywhere: from the media’s emphasis on normality, youth, and bodily perfection and its feel-good holiday stories about blind people getting guide dogs to everyday expressions such as “a crippled/paralyzed economy,” “blind obedience/rage/ambition,” “that’s so lame/idiotic/dumb,” “her suggestion fell on deaf ears,” or in admonitions to “stand up for

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19 Consider new learning disabilities such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Asperger’s Syndrome. Even if such diagnoses have proved controversial, they reveal much about American society’s coming to terms with defining disability and responding to it, a fact that will surely interest future historians.

20 As Susan Wendell and others have made clear, factors such as race, class, gender, nationality, and age can have a significant impact on the experience of living with an impairment and its disabling consequences. Her book The Rejected Body carries on a sensitive, thought-provoking discussion of these congruences throughout.

21 Trying to explain why even those who champion the causes of most marginal groups have trouble viewing disabled people as an oppressed minority, Mary Johnson boils it down to the false perception that “no one is against the handicapped.” The phrase says there is no animus against disabled people—even though they are segregated and kept from full access to society, even though the special programs society affords them make for a much circumscribed life.” Johnson, Make Them Go Away, 44. These issues also come up in Linda Hamilton Krieger, ed., Backlash against the Americans with Disabilities Act: Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2002). In light of these observations, we need more scholarship that explores how disability intersects with other identities in the past.
My point here is not to call out the language police but rather to underscore the impulse and the significance behind disability being represented in such trivializing, negative ways within so many diverse contexts. Indeed, one of the most challenging aspects of disability is to convince non-disabled people that even when it involves pain and hardship, disability is not always a tragedy, hardship, or lack but in fact often provides much of value. This helps explain why, like the pioneers in gay and lesbian history, many disabled scholars try to “pass,” worrying that “coming out” will lead to stigma and isolation as long as our culture consciously or subconsciously equates dis-ability with in-ability. Compounded by disability’s absence from diversity discussions, the resulting invisibility of disabled colleagues reinforces the idea that the topic remains marginal to academic inquiry, being instead a condition to be fixed by installing ramps and special mechanisms on doors.

But, in fact, the study of disability offers the conceptual tools for exploring the underlying assumptions beneath modern Western societies’ creation of the very environments where historians work—environments built on the assumption that everyone is young, strong, tireless, healthy, of similar size and shape, independent, and with all physical and mental components and in perfect working order.

Hinting at this greater promise, the fourteen books published between 1999 and 2002 discussed below represent a historical subfield with far-reaching implications for research and teaching that is just beginning to blossom. Even given my “slice


23 As physical and/or mental outsiders, disabled people offer a valuable critique of a world that non-disabled people take for granted. “When people cannot ground their self-worth in their conformity to cultural body ideals or social expectations of performance,” Wendell explains, “the exact nature of those ideals and expectations and their pervasive, unquestioning acceptance becomes much clearer.” Rejected Body, 69. Profiling various people both disabled and not who have worked with disability in some way, Andrew Potok, A Matter of Dignity: Changing the Lives of the Disabled (New York, 2002), offers perhaps the most compelling, unsentimental case for finding beauty, wonder, and imagination in the challenges disability brings. As he explains in the introduction, “some say that being different means being less, others that it has within it the possibility of a new synthesis, a new paradigm. And it can provide the joys that attend transformation” (8). Georgina Kleege’s unorthodox memoir Sight Unseen (New Haven, Conn., 1999) uses her partial blindness to explore visual culture, providing a fine example of how a disability can enhance perspectives. Some credit Dr. Oliver Sacks for doing something similar, albeit from the perspective of a person without a disability, a topic explored by Leonard Cassuto, “Oliver Sacks and the Medical Case Narrative,” in Snyder, Bruggemann, and Garland-Thomson, Enabling the Humanities, 118–30. An increasingly vocal group of disabled people has begun to celebrate difference in ways comparable to the cultures of ethnic minorities. Deaf culture, the most obvious example, will be taken up in the second-to-last part of this essay. On the topic of a broader disability culture, see Susan Crutchfield and Martha Epstein, Points of Contact: Disability, Art, and Culture (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2000), 1–20. For disability and popular culture, see The Ragged Edge Magazine (formerly The Disability Rag), www.ragged-edge-mag.com; and The Mouth: Voice of the Disability Nation, www.mouthmag.com.


of the current English-language literature" approach, choosing what to include was difficult. I have tried to provide a wide sampling of books and methods that would give a sense of the possibilities, at the same time that I have sought to emphasize ways of linking insights from these studies with issues animating mainstream discussions in our discipline. Since this field is rather new for historians, I have selectively drawn on recent scholarship in other areas to give some idea of imaginative roads that can be taken. Still, space constraints forced me to make some seemingly arbitrary choices, and I had to omit a number of excellent studies currently being completed or that arrived too late to be reviewed. To emphasize the area's breadth and depth, my discussion first covers disability history generally, then focuses on deaf history, the field's most highly developed subgenre. Since the books under review reflect disability history's predominantly Western and modern character, the conclusion will explore some comparative issues that suggest ways of viewing the subject from a more global perspective.

HENRI-JACQUES STIKER's far-ranging and often lyrical History of Disability gives a sense of just how ambitious the questions in this new field can be. The 1999 translation of his 1983 classic French work offers a long-term perspective spanning Western culture from biblical times to the present. Readers will find it exciting and frustrating for all the reasons that many still have a love-hate relationship with Michel Foucault. Trained in philosophy and considered a historical anthropologist, Stiker wrote when Foucault was at the height of his popularity in France, and he often uses history both eclectically and strategically to advance a brilliantly provocative agenda with far-reaching implications. But the similarities end there. Not a simple rehashing of Foucault's ideas applied to disability, this passionate, sometimes difficult, always stimulating book covers new theoretical and methodological ground. Readers who persevere will be rewarded, for through disability—the ultimate difference—Stiker provides a way to reconsider issues of poverty, religion, race, gender, sexuality, and cross-cultural encounters over a broad span of time.

At the root of Stiker's analysis lies an intriguing set of concerns: what would it take for a culture to integrate disability naturally, even positively, into its understanding of humanity without trying to control or cure it? Given the trajectory of Western history with its Judea-Christian and Greco-Roman roots, could such a development be possible in our modern world? And what would a society based on these ideas be like? To examine these questions, Stiker turns the tables; he looks

26 For example, I did not include the two recent biographies about Laura Bridgman: Ernest Freeberg, The Education of Laura Bridgman: First Deaf and Blind Person to Learn Language (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); and Elizabeth Gitter, The Imprisoned Guest: Samuel Howe and Laura Bridgman, the Original Deaf-Blind Girl (New York, 2001). They have been extensively reviewed together in both the mainstream and academic press. Historians will gain much by reading Douglas C. Baynton's discussion in "Laura Bridgman and the History of Disability," Reviews in American History 30, no. 2 (June 2002). The essays contained in the anthologies reviewed below give a good idea of the excellent work under way.

27 For simplicity, I use small d "deaf" rather than capital D "Deaf" throughout this essay. For a discussion of why, see note 63.

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not at ways that Western civilization sought to exclude people with disabilities but rather at how societies worked to include them. For Stiker, who proclaims that "in its essence, every rejection of difference is totalitarian and dictatorial, and gentle ways have often been preferred to brutal ones," integration represents a display of cultural cowardice, a capitulation. Interrogating the individual's own personal drive toward sameness and critiquing modern society's need to erase difference, he explores how everything from government rehabilitation policies to educational plans to ethics itself strives toward an unhealthy goal that might ultimately be Western society's undoing. A fervent critique that might seem to run counter to the progressive, liberal message of inclusion being a panacea, A History of Disability provides tools for readers to explore how terms such as "assimilation," "integration," and "inclusion" came to be so problematic in today's contests over identity. At the same time, it urges us to question our ultimate social and political goals, while asking where our ideals originate and what they say about modern civilization.

While anthropology helps Stiker ask the questions, his training as a philosopher helps answer them. Thus texts (mostly in the more narrow, traditional sense of the word) provide the main focus of his analysis: the Bible, Greek myths (with a particularly interesting discussion of Oedipus), Plato, Dominican texts, writings of St. Vincent de Paul, drafts of various French constitutions, mission statements for blind schools, and promotional literature for rehabilitation establishments. Stiker's multifaceted analysis leads him down a number of methodological roads. To cite one example, he seeks to unravel the intertwined relationship between language and culture as it develops over time by tracing the shifting meanings of words such as "disability," "handicap," "cure," and "rehabilitation." By implication, he asks readers to contemplate why so many terms associated with disability are negations (dis-ability, impairment, mal-formation), yet we still lack a widely used expression such as "racism," "misogyny," or "homophobia" to describe the phenomenon of casting it in a negative light. Beyond language, Stiker's analysis takes such forces as religion and capitalism into account, thereby offering historians not the definitive discussion of disability and history suggested by its grandiose title but a provocation, an invitation to think differently about the principles that organize the world.

The essays in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky's collection, The New Disability History: American Perspectives, focus more narrowly than Stiker, but they offer an excellent entree into the field by demonstrating its promising variety. The

29 Stiker, History of Disability, 13.
30 Stiker, History of Disability, 47–59.
31 Stiker, History of Disability, chap. 6.
32 While the term "ablism" comes into increasing use, it remains—at least for now—marginal, often tinged with the sarcasm people reserve for politically correct expressions such as "physically challenged" and "differently abled." Joseph Grigely adds that, unlike with other marginal groups, "disabled" does not immediately engage a human context because it is part of an independent matrix for that which is dysfunctional or otherwise adjudicated by [negative] prefixes." Grigely, "Postcards to Sophie Calle," in Crutchfield and Epstein, Points of Contact, 40. British theorists such as Mairian Corker prefer "disablism," another term that has not caught on in the United States. For a detailed discussion of language and disabiblity, see Mairian Corker and Sally French, eds., Disability Discourse (Philadelphia, 1999).
pieces more than substantiate the volume’s prevailing claim that disability is everywhere in history, once you begin to look for it. The volume concentrates roughly on the period 1850–1950, with most of the fourteen essays clustered around the Progressive Era and several pieces bringing issues up to the present. Authors engage with intellectual, social, cultural, and policy history as well as labor, gender, literature, old and new media, covering a full range of motor, sensory, and mental disabilities. Since the editors want to place disability squarely at the center of concerns that animate mainstream scholarly debates, the book’s important introduction and subsequent essays raise questions such as: what is the role of the state, and how does it interact with changing ideas of citizenship? What part does language play in modern society, both in terms of communication and representation? What does it mean to be “normal,” and how are these values conveyed? Despite its diverse subject matter and approaches, the collection is surprisingly coherent, as much because of common threads in American history as because of the focus on disability.

The New Disability History also derives coherence from the contributors’ explicit and implicit critique of what disability studies scholars call “the medical model.” Born in the nineteenth century, this view of disability evolved with the modern state in the aftermath of the two world wars and persists to the present day in only slightly altered form. As Longmore and Umansky explain, this approach “personalizes disability, casting it as a deficit located within individuals that requires rehabilitation to correct the physiological defect or to amend the social deficiency.” Writing just after World War I, philanthropist-businessman Douglas C. McMurtrie articulated the contrasting “social model” by asserting that “the greatest handicap is not a loss of limb or other disability but the weight of public opinion,” which could include encounters with disconcerted non-disabled people, low expectations, limited employment options, housing discrimination, lack of financial or personal assistance, an inaccessible environment, or limited educational opportunities, to name the most obvious. Indeed, nearly all the essays engage at some level with this conflict and how it plays out in institutions, charity crusades, advocacy, policy, and even a person’s sense of self. Brad Byrom’s article “A Pupil and a Patient: Hospital-Schools in Progressive America,” presents perhaps the most explicit contrasts by looking at what he calls “medical rehabilitationists” and “social rehabilitationists.” Like many of the contributors, Byrom follows two sides engaged in a battle, yet he shows how they often overlapped and borrowed from one another, invariably creating a complex knot of power relations. Kim Nielsen’s essay, “Helen Keller and the Politics of Civic Fitness,” shows how America’s disabled icon embodied these contradictions as she fought to be taken seriously for her political and economic observations (initially, she defended socialism, pacifism, and wom-

34 The assertion is Baynton’s in “Disability and the Justification of Inequality,” 52. He notes: “Disability is everywhere in history once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write.”

35 Longmore and Umansky, New Disability History, 7.

36 Quoted by Brad Byrom, “A Pupil and a Patient: Hospital-Schools in Progressive America,” in Longmore and Umansky, New Disability History, 138.

37 Byrom, “Pupil and a Patient,” 133–56.
en's rights) in a culture embracing the medical model with gusto. Thus Keller could lambaste American society for denying her opportunities as a disabled person while simultaneously turning her back on disability rights as a spokesperson for the then-paternalistic American Foundation for the Blind, and even publicly supporting euthanasia for “the unfit.”

By critiquing the medical model, Longmore and Umansky’s collection offers a different perspective on the history of medicine and insights for the study of history more broadly. The contributors’ critical look at mechanisms of oppression, as well as at how disabled people participated and resisted, raises important questions about historical agency and its relationship to the nature and goals of medical history itself. Together, the essays reveal how medicalization created a special role both for the disabled person in society and for disability as a social variable. But they also show how numerous disabled people challenged these classifications, often introducing not just a different interpretation but a different narrative for how they fit into history. Just like women, people of color, Jews, and sexual minorities, many with disabilities have come to equate breaking free of medical definitions as a form of liberation and a way to contest historically contingent ideas of normality. Living up to its name, The New Disability History responds to this challenge while helping to document it as historical reality.

Rab Houston and Uta Frith’s Autism in History: The Case of Hugh Blair of Borgue suggests that, for some scholars, disability remains so firmly rooted in medicine that, even when the evidence shows that physicians and other health professionals played little or no role, we still get a medical history. Written by a historian and a professor of cognitive development, the two-part book offers a case study of Hugh of Borgue, an autistic child born to a wealthy landowning family in rural Scotland during the early eighteenth century. In the first part, we learn of his relationships with family members, neighbors, and the broader community. While the authors claim that this first part places their study within a larger historical context, the background information on social attitudes, treatment, and economic developments reads rather naïvely and awkwardly, lacking nuance. The book’s second part offers a “clinical interpretation” of the case from the standpoint of more modern studies of autism, a fact that might help explain the missing historical depth. The authors seek to “expose the unchanging core of autism” at the same time that they want to shed light on the ways different societies understand it. This leads to introductions such as “He was called ‘the daft lad of Borgue.’ Can we improve on this general evaluation using scientific procedures?” Valid in some fields, such goals run counter to recent trends in historical scholarship that stress relativism over finding cultural commonalities and that see “presentism” as a dirty word. But, more troubling from the perspective of historians, the authors let their argument determine the history they cite rather than vice versa, which gives the treatment of

40 Rab Houston and Uta Frith, Autism in History: The Case of Hugh Blair of Borgue (Oxford, 2000).
41 Houston and Frith, Autism in History, 4.
42 Houston and Frith, Autism in History, 132.
historical evidence a strained quality and a feeling that key details have been left out.

Nonetheless, the book provides a captivating, unusually well-documented early case history of a disability. It comes to us through a rich variety of legal texts generated by the fact that Blair’s brother tried to prove him mentally ineligible to inherit the family fortune, particularly after his mother arranged a marriage for her “eccentric” son. As a result, we have a curious civil court case that allows us to see into local life in a rural community during the complex decades of the 1740s and 1750s where religion and legal authority conflicted and overlapped in unexpected ways. Significantly—and this is one of *Autism in History’s* most noteworthy contributions—physicians played almost no role in these deliberations. In the generation before medicine became a respected profession, local community leaders and family members sought expertise in other ways and other places for a condition such as Blair’s. Not merely a matter of religious concern, the unconforming aristocrat also invited early speculations about the existence of a “self” and its relationship to the community as a legal and economic entity. As interested researchers unearth more of these cases and the invaluable primary source documentation they generated, scholars will learn more about local community values as well as about the professions and notions of authority at a key period of transition in Western history.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, unusual public behavior had come under the watchful eye of the medical profession, as demonstrated by Howard I. Kushner’s book *A Cursing Brain? The Histories of Tourette Syndrome.* Using everything from case histories to professional journals and letters (including material from Ann Landers), Kushner traces the complex history of a still poorly understood condition that causes people to engage in involuntary motor movements such as twitching and rapid eye blinking, growling, barking, and coprolalia (swearing). Unlike previous histories of Tourette’s, the book goes beyond the founding myths, such as the case of “the cursing marquise” made famous in the 1820s by the young doctor Georges Gilles de la Tourette as the “maladie des tics.” Instead, it looks closely at the elements that went into the case becoming so emblematic for generations of subsequent researchers. In fact, Kushner provides a model for how to offer a close reading of texts to illuminate larger issues of concern to the medical community, even as he demonstrates an appreciation for quirky detail such as the twenty-three-year-old French woman in the 1970s who cursed in Latin.

Kushner masters these details to tell a bigger story of how Tourette’s came to be seen as a physical, organic condition as opposed to a psychological or social problem. Since Tourette’s could be understood in various ways, cultural factors played an especially important part in determining cures; the French turned to psychoanalysis, while the Anglo-Saxon world saw it as a “syndrome” that could be kept at bay with drugs such as Haldol. To explain the different approaches, Kushner

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44 Since no historians have written about Tourette’s, Kushner has taken issue with the histories provided by medical professionals; *Cursing Brain,* 11, n. 6.
45 Kushner, *Cursing Brain,* 160.
explores the place of psychoanalysis in the French medical imagination because, he argues in part, it came to dominate all approaches to mental illness after its practitioners became associated with resistance to the Nazi occupation in the 1940s. Meanwhile, in the United States, grass-roots organizations such as the American Tourette’s Syndrome Association, founded in the early 1970s, proved to be one of the early groups that clamored for effective and affordable drug treatments a decade before gay men with AIDS would launch similar initiatives.

As the question mark and plural “histories” of the book’s title suggest, Kushner has been influenced by recent scholarly trends that question the legitimacy of turning exclusively to physicians for the authoritative story. Yet, even though he brings readers up to the present, where he concludes by stressing the fact that “the afflicted have something to tell us about their affliction,” he ultimately sticks rather closely to the debates among the French and American medical communities. Kushner would have gained much by drawing on a disability perspective that takes factors such as discrimination, popular culture, and economic forces (both inside and outside of medicine) into account, since—as his own narrative intimates—they played an important part in shaping medical debates and treatment options for this socially ambiguous condition. Histories such as this one could greatly enhance our understanding of medical practices by exploring the complex interplays of forces such as representations, public policy, gender relations, and economic factors, while giving the people with Tourette’s themselves more agency by including their perspective.

Much of the recent revisionist scholarship on disability—even scholarship on the modern period—has examined cultural constructions outside the medical arena. With a subject label on the cover that places it in “American History/Literary Criticism,” Rachael Adams’s Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination offers a provocative contrast with the previous two books, seeing people with disabilities not as “patients” or “cases” but rather as an important part of the social fabric. An assistant professor of English, Adams has done enough history homework to offer a compelling, if very loosely chronological, narrative tracing how ideas toward the public display of human anamolies evolved from roughly 1850 to the present. Covering similar ground to both Leslie Fiedler’s Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self (1978) and Robert Bogdan’s Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit (1988), Adams updates and redefines the story by using ideas from postcolonialism, critical race theory, and queer studies, with a dose of political savvy and sensitivity from disability studies. As medicine, propriety, and ultimately political correctness “evicted” freak shows from popular culture and sent them into financial ruin, Adams argues, their hold on the American cultural imagination spilled into other venues. Twentieth-century connoisseurs of high art, photography, literature, and performance in some senses differed little from past voyeurs. Unlike her predecessors, Adams not only brings the story up to present-day New York City, she steps back to take stock of what it

46 Kushner, Cursing Brain, 220.
47 The 1993 documentary Twitch and Shout offers a valuable non-medical perspective, telling the story of Tourette’s from the perspective of a photo-journalist with the condition.
means to write a history of this history, in a sense implicating her own readers as the latest generation of gawkers. More than mere rhetorical play, this awareness enables Adams to raise unsettling questions about our role as scholars doing studies of this kind, particularly when it involves exposing people who had been put on stage to be the objects of public display.

Thus it is no accident that Adams presents her own book as a sideshow by dividing it into three “acts,” each of which corresponds to changes in the role freaks played in the American cultural imagination. She begins at the turn of the century, when the general public, show organizers, journalists, respected anthropologists, medical doctors, and early Hollywood filmmakers accepted the Otherness of human curiosities as a given. In a climate where physical differences played an important part in defining someone’s economic status and sense of self, the boundaries easily blurred between sideshow and academic endeavors such as housing Ishi (billed as the last living “savage” of a native American tribe) at the University of California’s Hearst Museum. The book’s second part focuses on the mid-twentieth century, when, for post–World War II America, Adams notes a shift from viewing freaks as “Other” to seeing them as part of the rebellious inner self. From the closeted writings of Carson McCullers in the 1950s and early 1960s to the bold proclamations of Jerry Rubin (dubbed at the height of the counter-culture movement as “the P. T. Barnum of the revolution”49), writers and artists identified with freaks to the point that the widespread acceptance of psychoanalysis allowed many to embrace the “freak within” and ultimately difference itself. “Act III” brings the story full circle to explore artists who once again depict the freak as inherently different and the gulf between normal and abnormal as somehow unbridgeable. Just when feminist and other discussions declared social constructionism’s victory over biological determinism, writers such as Toni Morrison (Beloved, 1987) and Katherine Dunn (Geek Love, 1989) reasserted claims that the physical body played the essential part in determining both individual and social identity after all. Because it looks critically at social construction and identity without abandoning them altogether, Sideshow U.S.A. can help historians think carefully about what role disability plays when introduced into the complex overlaps and conflicts among race, gender, and class, thus giving us new tools for thinking about social order.

In contrast to the previous studies, which describe the non-disabled world’s construction of disability, The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation, by Doris Zames Fleischer and Frieda Zames, stresses the historical agency of disabled people themselves.50 Focusing on the last third of the twentieth century, when the crusade for disability civil rights first came into public view, this textbook offers an invaluable crash course. A history of political, legal, and social activism, it covers the major events of the movement: the temporary and effective militancy of the League of the Physically Handicapped in the 1930s, the “splendid deception” that masked President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s polio until his death in 1945, the rise

49 Adams, Sideshow U.S.A., 143.
of the Independent Living Movement in the 1960s, the nearly month-long sit-in by
disability activists at the San Francisco regional office of the U.S. Department of
Health, Education, and Welfare in the 1970s, the demonstrations of deaf students
at Gallaudet University demanding a deaf president in the 1980s, and conflicts
among various disability groups in the 1990s. Several chapters discuss the events
leading up to the passage of the ADA, showing how the landmark legislation drew
on strategies and language from other civil rights crusades in order to make a case
for people with disabilities to enjoy nondiscrimination, equal opportunities, and
even Affirmative Action. In addition, the book suggests territory ripe with
possibilities for future work in the field. Since this area is so little explored, one
could almost view each subsection within a chapter as a suggestion for potential
research topics for students and scholars alike. For anyone thinking about how
American social policy is hammered out, the impact of social activism, and the
parallels with other civil rights campaigns, *The Disability Rights Movement* has much
to offer.51 To put the matter in perspective, as disability activists did fighting for
accessible buses in the 1980s, “at least Rosa Parks could get on the bus!”52

The first people to become disability activists in the Western world, however
unwittingly, were ex-soldiers. David A. Gerber’s anthology, *Disabled Veterans in
History*, explores why, while providing valuable opportunities for understanding
both social constructions of “disability” and disabled people’s historical agency.53
Because, as some have wryly pointed out, “war is the most efficient way of creating
disabled people,” it offers a unique view into how different coexisting ideas of
disability came into conflict and how various policies for the civilian population
emerged as a result. Soldiers, of course, sustained their injuries in the patriotic and
sacrificial act of serving their country, thereby investing their disability with an
honorable quality, at least when they first returned home. In contrast, civilians—
even those who acquired disabilities on the job—seldom escaped being labeled
helpless, pathetic creatures or slackers who drained society of limited resources;
while civilians “received welfare,” ex-soldiers “earned benefits” and “rewards.”
Such a sense of entitlement and respect gave veterans the confidence and the clout
to speak up on their own behalf. Even though soldiers routinely sought to distance
themselves from the “less worthy” disabled civilians, their advocacy often led to the
creation of public assistance and rehabilitation programs for all citizens.

Divided into three thematic sections—“representations,” “public policy,” and
“living with a disability”—the volume covers a broad range of issues related to
veterans in North America and Europe. Ancient Greece, sixteenth-century Eng­
land, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War, World Wars I and II,
Americans in Vietnam, and Russians in Afghanistan together raise important
questions about the body, the relationship between the home and battlefront,

51 Richard K. Scotch’s recently reprinted *From Good Will to Civil Rights* offers an excellent history of
“Section 504” of the 1973 federal Vocational and Rehabilitation Act, the most influential antecedent
of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. For an overview of disability policy, see Deborah A. Stone,
*The Disabled State* (Philadelphia, 1994); Joseph Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New
Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1994). On disability civil rights, see Sharon Barnartt and Richard

52 Fleischer and Zames, *Disability Rights Movement*, 84.

challenges to masculinity, the development of national identity and collective memory, as well as the relationships among governments, policy, and self-advocacy. Because Gerber chose not to organize the essays chronologically, Disabled Veterans in History invites us to draw unlikely comparisons across time and to discover characteristics common to all wars rather than create a positivist narrative of war technology shaping ever-more-modern responses to disability. For example, while Martha Edwards’s “Philoctetes in Historical Context” presents an intriguing contrast with our modern ideas about disabled veterans, it also contains many familiar contradictions. The text reveals that ancient Greek culture did not have pensions, memorials, or any other indication that disabled soldiers existed as an official category. Yet the tragedy of Philoctetes turns on some of the same mixed feelings of revulsion and respect that Hollywood directors would use to manipulate spectators fifteen centuries later in movies about World War II and Vietnam.

But more than introducing readers to a little-explored corner of the past, Disabled Veterans in History forces readers to think differently about war itself. As Gerber points out in his first-rate introduction, war has long been the stuff of historical analysis, and yet few have stopped to ponder its major consequences. “Disability and disfigurement are not incidental to war’s purposes nor marginal to its effects, but rather, alongside the murder of those killed, the point to begin with,” he explains. “Only in making victims can war achieve its political ends.” Thus, in many ways, this collection reveals more about the greater society than about disability, since as Gerber notes, “disability is the dependent rather than the independent variable—it is the concept that helps to analyze and explain a larger phenomenon rather than the thing to be explained.” If reading Disabled Veterans in History makes it clear that it would be difficult to write the history of disability without discussing war, it makes an even stronger case that it should be impossible to write the history of war without disability.

Deborah Cohen’s book The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939 exemplifies Gerber’s contention by offering a close look at a single event through a comparative framework. Cohen begins with the intriguing problem of why England and Germany each responded to disabled veterans in ways that run contrary to what we might expect. In Weimar Germany, where the state embarked on a full-fledged, generous program to assist veterans after the war, and where as a result disabled soldiers appeared to be well taken care of, the Germans despised the state. Meanwhile, in Britain, where veterans with visible disabilities were banished from victory parades and struggled constantly for even the smallest benefits, the soldiers remained loyal, even complacent, citizens. To explain these unexpected responses, Cohen makes masterful use of British and German archival sources such as appeals for pensions, internal government reports and correspon-

56 Gerber, Disabled Veterans, 4.
Disability History

dence, personal letters, and newspapers in such a way that brings policy and institutional history to life. The key actors turn out to be both large and small: voluntary organizations, housewives, government bureaucrats, and veterans, with each group interacting differently as Britain and Germany created varying ideas of civil society in the years during and after the war. Accordingly, this well-written and engaging history of philanthropy follows the attempts by numerous people—both unknown and famous—to open facilities, collect money from rich and poor, and create “living memorials” to help the war wounded in both countries.

Cohen’s smart, difficult-to-summarize argument invites historians to think in more nuanced ways about the role veterans played in Adolf Hitler’s rise to power. For Cohen, the outcome in 1918 proved less important than the expectations soldiers in each country had of the state and the public, and how these played out in honoring the implicit contract of war. Thus, having quashed fairly successful private charity efforts in its drive to assert power, the German Weimar state ultimately created expectations it could not fulfill. At the same time, it gave rise to the mistaken impression that the German public had abandoned its disabled veterans, not because of defeat but because of failed rehabilitation. German veterans’ organizations emerged as strong advocacy groups that vented their frustration and anger at state and public alike. Meanwhile, across the Channel, the state had long been rather parsimonious and continued to draw on the public’s generosity. Government-sponsored relief took a back seat to private philanthropy and volunteerism operating at the local level. This fragmented nature of the British charity system forced veterans to swallow their pride and accept their “victory” as men. But it established a mutually supportive bond between the soldiers and the British public, which in turn shaped the benevolent nature of ex-service organizations. Ironically, Cohen notes, had Weimar allowed private philanthropy to flourish, the numerous organizations might have served as a buffer between the state and the veterans’ anger, a fact that might have prevented the soldiers from turning to National Socialism.58 The War Come Home argues against government intervention in favor of returning to traditional systems of private philanthropy at the same time that it respectfully accords disabled veterans a distinct, powerful voice too long denied them.

In modern times, technology has played a significant role in the lives of veterans as well as in the broader population of disabled people. Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics is a fascinating interdisciplinary collection edited by Katharine Ott, David Serlin, and Steven Mihm that examines the history of everything from synthetic limbs and artificial eyes to breast implants.59 At the intersection of disability studies and the history of technology, the volume explicitly challenges the vogue among many cultural theorists to use “prosthesis” too loosely to mean virtually any interface between humans and machines, explaining that “the people in the history this volume chronicles were too busy living to be restrained by our post-structuralist worries over the cultural contingencies of what they did or didn’t need.”

who they were.” Here, the emphasis is on material culture and lived experience that places people more than theory at center stage. As the feisty introduction points out, "the material and social tales of prosthetics provide a more intimate and compelling history of embodied technology than any postmodern cyborg can account for."60 Most of the articles focus on Europe and North America, exploring the lives of prosthetic developers and users, ranging from ex-soldiers to nightclub workers.

The most intellectually rewarding pieces push the edges of how readers think of disability. For example, Elizabeth Haiken’s “Modern Miracles: The Development of Cosmetic Prosthetics” explores America’s search for perfection at the crossroads of medical advances and increasing consumerism after World War II. "The category of need, which once seemed self-evident (as well as strictly physical),” she explains, "became more difficult to define as psychological thinking was added to the mix."61 Thus, as technology advanced, choices increased to such an extent that some disabilities could be “fixed” and a human body could be reconfigured in the process. Not only did this new mastery blur distinctions between need and desire, it also threatened to broaden Americans’ definitions of a disability to encompass even the smallest cosmetic imperfection. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we have Raman Srinivasan’s “Technology Sits Cross-Legged: Developing the Jaipur Foot Prosthesis,” which explores a low-end, practical technology in the developing world. Created in the 1960s by an Indian orthopedic surgeon working with an odd assortment of engineers, artists, craftspeople, rocket scientists, and voluntary organizations, the Jaipur foot belonged to “a class of hand-crafted, multiple-axis prosthetic devices that evoke the human foot exceptionally well in form and function, and yet are cheaper than a pair of Indian shoes.”62 This product of what its inventor called “the colonial mind set free” offered its own critique of Western medicine because it bypassed bureaucracy and materialism to deliver a simple, functional, and flexible solution to people who needed it. Though sentimental in places, the essay—like the actual foot—presents a revealing alternative vision of rehabilitation and Western medicine’s role in constructing the individual.

Many readers will welcome the anthology’s material-culture approach and the diverse backgrounds of its contributors. True to this emphasis, Artificial Parts, Practical Lives contains numerous illustrations accompanied by informative captions more akin to museum displays than to the minimal ones in most history texts, which reflects the fact that one of the editors is a curator at the Smithsonian. Of course, to engage with this history means being explicit about what theorists euphemistically describe with terms such as “the body-technology interface”; thus this volume contains some graphic descriptions of flesh, bones, metal, and wood being twisted, poked, sliced, pierced, or thumped in ways that challenge how most of us imagine a body and its possibilities. While the anthology as a whole makes a strong case for providing such detail, some authors use it more effectively.

60 Ott, Serlin, and Mihm, Artificial Parts, 3.
than others. Generally, however, *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives* is rich and informative, full of insight and promise.

Having shown that disability history can cover a large span of time, place, topics, and approaches, I now turn to deaf history, its most highly developed subgenre. By looking at how a variety of scholars have explored a single, clearly defined group, we can move beyond a discussion seemingly of apples and oranges to concentrate on the many possibilities for apples alone. More important, deaf history will help scholars move from thinking about disability as an individual's pathological characteristic to considering it as a social category. Once American deaf activists of the 1980s began to convince the world that their use of American Sign Language made them a legitimate linguistic minority much like those who speak Czech, Spanish, or Urdu, it became possible to see deaf communities more like ethnic groups. Implicit in this change was a shift to seeing deaf people as active agents in their own fate rather than as passive victims of a medical condition. A product of this new attitude, deaf history far outpaces the literature devoted to other disabilities, particularly that concerning its alter ego, blindness. And unlike the equally prolific subgenre of studies related to mental disabilities, where physicians and other caretakers have held the commanding voice, within deaf history it is assumed that deaf people themselves dominate the discussion. While not every-

63 Nearly all the studies in deaf history concern people who use sign language either because they were pre-lingually deaf or learned to sign later in life because of affinities with the highly organized, signing capital D deaf community. Despite the powerful influence of culturally deaf people, deafness encompasses a much larger number, most of them "hard of hearing" or "hearing-impaired" adults who experienced hearing loss with age and who never learned to sign. Because it is not always easy to tell whether a given text refers to Deaf or deaf concerns, and since deaf history can pertain to a broad spectrum of people, I have opted for the easy solution of the lowercase "d" throughout this review. An informal sampling of the first pages of recent studies of deaf history and culture reveals no commonly agreed-upon rule.

64 On the arrival of deaf culture, see Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); John B. Christiansen and Sharon N. Barnartt, *Deaf President Now! The 1988 Revolution at Gallaudet University* (Washington, D.C., 1995). This deaf culture is nurtured by Gallaudet University, devoted to educating deaf students since the 1860s, and Gallaudet University Press, which publishes numerous works on deaf and—to a lesser extent—disability studies. While such institutions segregate deaf culture from discussions in mainstream scholarly circles, they also foster a climate of intellectual excitement.


66 Linton offers a cogent discussion of what differentiates disability studies from the "applied fields" (meaning rehabilitation, healthcare, and medicine), a distinction that provides background for how approaches to histories of mental illness tend to differ from approaches to deaf history. Claiming Disability, "Disability Studies/Not Disability Studies," 132–56.
one with a disability can claim a similar linguistic bond, and few would seek to create the separatist world advocated by some deaf activists, many take heart in the fact that seemingly timeless ideas can be changed. Deaf history, then, offers an indication of where disability history might lead as it seeks to find a balance between recovering the raw data of history, celebration, and critical inquiry. Meanwhile, once it has been more widely understood and explored as a category on a par with gender, race, and class, disability can help deaf history develop even stronger and more diverse ties to mainstream historical debates.

But one important problem remains: deafness has a fraught relationship with disability. Like the African Americans and women who have used disability to advance their own status, many deaf people have sought to create a positive identity by claiming not to be disabled.67 Thus some scholars and the people they write about might be offended to be included in this review, arguing that they represent a unique culture of difference rather than people limited in the dramatic ways suggested by a charged word like “disability.” Still, to the extent that they acknowledge limitations, a large number of deaf people would agree with the general disabled population that social attitudes, prejudice, paternalism, an inaccessible environment, and economic hardships often pose greater difficulties than the actual condition. Even when taking into account that disability evades easy definition, the fact remains that, in many legal, social, medical, political, and personal situations, deafness fits.

Two related topics—the establishment of deaf education and the debates over sign language versus speech—together weave in and out of nearly every study of deaf history.68 Sign, as anyone encountering the deaf world for the first time

67 Lois Bragg, ed., Deaf World (New York, 2001), 319; Padden and Humphries, Deaf in America, 43–44. Throughout Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community (New York, 1992), Harlan Lane argues passionately for de-coupling deafness and disability. People with other disabilities, even including some activists, walk a fine line between embracing disability and distancing themselves from it, thereby giving a mixed message. In its literature, for example, the largest blindness advocacy organization, the National Federation of the Blind, tries to minimize the stigma of blindness by noting that, with proper training in alternative techniques and attitudes, blindness can be transformed from a tragedy to a mere nuisance (www.blind.net/bonwhati.htm); in private conversations, this often gets translated into saying flat out that blindness is not a disability. The history of the ADA reveals that various groups created a fragile coalition simply to get the legislation passed. See Zames and Fleischer, Disability Rights Movement, 88–109.

68 On deaf history, see John Vickrey Van Cleve, ed., Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship (Washington, D.C., 1993), a still-unsurpassed volume that explores the topic primarily from a North American perspective but that also includes essays from Western Europe and Russia. One of the earliest histories is by Edward Miner Gallaudet, History of the College for the Deaf, 1837–1907 (1905; rpt. edn., Washington, D.C., 1983). John Vickrey Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America (Washington, D.C., 1989), gives a more recent simple narrative overview. Jonathan Rée, I See a Voice: Deafness, Language, and the Senses (New York, 1999), offers an even bigger, provocative, if sometimes glib, picture. Books that elaborate on many of these themes include Susan Burch, Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II (New York, 2002), which reinterprets the debates over sign language by drawing more heavily on the deaf perspective than have previous studies, while Harlan Lane’s When the Mind Hears; presents a feisty narrative of deaf history told from the first-person perspective of Laurent Clerc. (The bibliography, 457–518, is an especially valuable part of the book.) Baynton’s Forbidden Signs provides one of the best examples of how a disability perspective can bring fruitful insights to major developments in mainstream American history. Linking debates over sign language to similar discussions regarding immigration, race, and gender differences, Baynton shows how a particular brand of paternalism infused both sides’ justification for defining what it meant to be American in the nineteenth century. Rebecca Edwards reevaluates the standard chronology in her essay “Speech Has
realizes, serves as the focal point of everything having to do with deafness. Not just a language for communication, signing both creates and symbolizes an individual’s and the greater community’s relationship to identity, politics, and connections to the hearing world. Deaf people have a “creation myth” beginning first with Abbé de l’Epée encountering a community of deaf Parisians and learning the language, followed by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet meeting the deaf student Laurent Clerc, who had been educated in French sign language, and inviting the young man back to the United States, where together they formed the first deaf school in 1817. By the end of the nineteenth century, a schism had grown between two groups who claimed to be representing the best interests of deaf people. On one side, “oralists” campaigned aggressively for forbidding the use of sign, arguing that only if deaf people were forced to speak could they be civilized humans in a democracy where speech was so important. On the other side, “manualists” advocated sign—or some combination of it and speech—as the best way for deaf people to communicate with intelligence and subtlety, since most pre-lingually deaf people never learned to lip-read and speak well enough to be fully functional in spoken English. Thus the most important battles over identity and agency took place in the deaf schools and focused on the issue of language.

In Damned for Their Difference: The Cultural Construction of Deaf People as Disabled, Jan Branson and Don Miller provide an excellent, if unusual, point of departure for understanding deaf history in the West. Although the two Australian sociologists draw heavily from recent French theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Georges Canguillhem, and Michel Foucault, and although they advance a critique much like Stiker’s of the contradictions inherent in capitalist democracies, their study follows a synthetic more than an eclectic path. To be sure, as the title implies, the book embodies deaf history’s uneasy relationship to disability. The first fifty-six pages introduce major trends in European history—changing ideas of cosmology and science, the rise of industrial capitalism, the development of the modern state, the impact of imperialism and war, and the advent of globalization—to offer a clear, sensitive critique of how disability became pathologized and disabled people increasingly undervalued as a result; the remaining two hundred pages measure the deaf community’s success in fleeing from disability. Since the French and American cases have determined the parameters for how generations of scholars have approached deaf history, the book’s attention to Britain and Australia provides a good opportunity to question some basic assumptions. For example, according to Branson and Miller, the British introduced many of the philosophical ideas about the role of language in educating the deaf nearly a century before the French, but they medicalized deafness (turned it into a disability) later. This created a more complex debate between proponents of sign language and those of speech than has

an Extraordinary Humanizing Power: Horace Mann and the Problem of Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education,” in Longmore and Umansky, New Disability History, 58–82. Nora Groce, Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language, takes an anthropological approach to the study of what she presents as a very integrated community of deaf and hearing people living on Martha’s Vineyard since the 1800s.

previously been assumed because British ideas of professionalization and medical authority followed their own path.

*Damned for Their Difference* also introduces scholars to new ways of thinking about disability and deafness in relation to ideas of the nation and the individual. Throughout their study, Branson and Miller return to “the contradictions between the exploitive mode of production and individualism,” showing how capitalist democracy creates tensions between its political promise of individual agency and equality on the one hand and its thirst for economic expansion that fueled the drive to regulate and standardize to ensure a stable work force on the other. Products of this new capitalist state, the medical profession and the educational system rendered deaf people powerless and alone by transforming them from just another example of difference in a local community to “disabled non-hearing people” best relegated to institutions. But lest readers come away with a simplistic idea that deaf people were only innocent victims, *Damned for Their Difference* ends with a spirited critique of recent drives to create national sign language dictionaries—symbols of deaf culture’s success in the West—as oppressive to a patchwork of deaf linguistic traditions existing in much of the world. “Even the oppressed themselves can become oppressors if the complexities of linguistic and cultural rights are not explored,” Branson and Miller warn.

Perhaps because many have struggled valiantly to free deafness from pathological associations, deaf history contains two countercurrents: one shows deaf people as historical agents, while the other decries their status as victims. Like most sophisticated works in deaf history, Robert M. Buchanan’s monograph, *Illusions of Equality: Deaf Americans in School and Factory, 1850–1950*, embodies both, in this case by looking at labor history. Using records from institutions and workplaces, Buchanan tells the story of deaf leadership and the tensions within the deaf community not just over matters related to language but also regarding the role of the state and what deaf people believed they could legitimately and usefully gain from government assistance. In other words, *Illusions of Equality* shows deaf people wrestling with questions regarding the relationship they wanted to create between their identity, mainstream American society, and disability, indeed, whether they wanted to be considered disabled at all.

Buchanan traces deaf history with a special emphasis on a thriving community of people initially drawn to the tire factories of Akron, Ohio, around 1910. Particularly mindful of class issues as well as the parallels with the experiences of immigrants, the book charts the ups and downs of deaf men and women living through the dramatic changes brought by industrialization and the two world wars. Once people who had been absorbing American values of pride and self-sufficiency in deaf educational institutions confronted the realities of a mainstream society that rejected them, they flocked to places that accepted them. For instance, when a factory such as Goodyear began employing deaf workers by the hundreds in what reporters called the “Silent Colony” of skilled, semi-skilled, and even management

70 Branson and Miller, *Damned for Their Difference*, 251.
71 Branson and Miller, *Damned for Their Difference*, 248.
jobs at the beginning of World War I, the city's deaf population swelled to the point that people in other American cities noticed an exodus. At its height during World War I, the Akron deaf community, like others across the nation, boasted its own religious and civic organizations, many of which conducted charity drives for the war, social events such as silent movie screenings, and an active football team. The fortunes of Akron's deaf community rose and fell with the American economy, as desperate employers went out of their way to hire deaf people in wartime and—just like Rosie the Riveter—unceremoniously dismissed them in times of peace with the return of the regular labor force. Meanwhile, deaf workers debated hot issues such as whether they should join unions or whether they would stand a better chance of employment by being strikebreakers.

Buchanan's *Illusions of Equality* demonstrates many of the strengths and weaknesses possible in historical approaches to disability. Buchanan is a talented, energetic researcher who has brought a compelling and important chapter of deaf history to life by introducing us to sources and case studies from across the country: student newspapers, organization reports, and labor decrees, as well as a wide array of captivating pictures showing ads for deaf workers, workers on the job, political cartoons, and leaders of the community. He tells a lively story with interesting characters and a good plot while making readers aware of places where future work needs to be done, most notably in issues related to race and gender. But even though Buchanan apologizes for not discussing women and African Americans in any depth, perhaps some race or postcolonial theory or even discussions of masculinity would have helped him understand a deaf community dominated by white male leaders in a more complex way. For example, rather than simply blaming deaf leaders' caution on their having internalized the dominant cultural values of hearing society with regard to race, gender, and class, it would be useful to apply some gender analysis to understanding the role of masculinity in the context of an evolving deaf culture. In what ways did the mainstream society's association between disability and femininity influence male leaders' choices? How were ideas of masculinity and work incorporated into deaf men's expectations of themselves?74

Such tools prove useful when interpreting primary sources, especially in the new

field of disability history, where such documents are only beginning to be discovered and analyzed, let alone put into print. Autobiographies provide a valuable, if complicated, source, at the same time that they offer important ways of giving disabled people a rare form of agency by allowing them to express themselves.75 Christopher Krentz’s book A Mighty Change: An Anthology of Deaf American Writing, 1816–1864 is the best autobiographical collection currently available for deaf history.76 Divided into two parts, the book focuses first on individual authors, chosen, Krentz notes, “for quality writing that merits preservation and provokes interest,” writers who lost their hearing before the age of eleven and identified with the community of deaf people who used sign language. Although in the introduction he worries that nearly all of his sources come from white males, he includes an unusual, absorbing account by a homeless deaf woman in Michigan writing before the Civil War.77 Once Krentz makes it clear just how difficult it was even for pre-lingual deaf people of the privileged classes to learn to write in a language they had never heard (and at a time when few believed that deaf people would write at all), our early twenty-first-century expectations of inclusion need to be seen as a product of our own times. Still, as parts of this volume—and my own discovery of an unpublished manuscript written by the blind daughter of French artisans in the 1820s—make clear, many more sources remain hidden away, masked by the fact that disability history has barely begun to be explored.78 The book’s second section, “Events and Issues,” presents an engaging set of discussions around important moments in deaf history of this period, including a heated debate in the 1850s over whether deaf people should create their own commonwealth in the form of a utopian community.79 One only wishes that, in a field that desperately needs people to tell their own stories, more such volumes existed for other times, other places, and other disabilities.

As for many other marginal groups, the Holocaust has produced some of the most poignant accounts in disability history.80 Yet, even though studies of this event


76 Christopher Krentz, ed., A Mighty Change: An Anthology of Deaf American Writing, 1816–1864 (Washington, D.C., 2000). Lois Bragg, Deaf World, demonstrates how the field of deaf studies is coming of age, particularly since she makes a point of offering a variety of perspectives, including those of women and African Americans. Unfortunately, she can do this largely because most of the selections for Deaf World are still too recent to be history; the earliest one dates from 1852, but well over half come from the 1990s alone. Moreover, since Bragg has not managed to create enough distance between herself and the documents, the sections introducing various texts read more like primary sources themselves.


79 Krentz, Mighty Change, 161–211.

occupy whole sections in bookstores, and even though disabled people were among its first victims as the Nazis tested public opinion for eliminating undesirable citizens, little scholarship has been published on disability in this context. 81 More work addresses the subject by exploring the Holocaust’s turn-of-the-century foundations in the rise of eugenics, a respected scientific, state-supported approach to “human betterment.” 82

Many Western nations, including the United States and Nazi Germany, passed legislation that prohibited marriages between “defectives,” mandated forced sterilization programs, and supported euthanasia for disabled people. Given these inauspicious roots, the lack of scholarly discussion about disability and the Holocaust becomes even more striking since some estimate that as many as a million people were murdered because of their disability. 83 A number of factors might explain this lacuna, among them perhaps a tacit acceptance that the Nazis may have been right to want to eliminate this particular group of “undesirables.” Disabled people have never received recognition as victims of genocide, and even now that gay rights activists have added homosexuals to the list along with Romany and Jews, the public knows surprisingly little about disability and the Holocaust. 84

Horst Biesold’s Crying Hands: Eugenics and Deaf People in Nazi Germany is a welcome, if problematic, early contribution to this little-told story. 85 Culled and translated from a German doctoral dissertation based on interviews with over 1,200 deaf victims of Nazi persecution, this is a very disturbing book. It plunges readers into the muddy waters of science, eugenics, and decisions about the value of human life by focusing on the forced sterilization of deaf people, beginning with


83 The Disability Rights Advocates in Oakland, California, have an ongoing “Disability Holocaust Project,” www.dralegal.org/projects/disabilityholocaust/, which published a pamphlet (available online) in 1991 (reprint 2001), “Forgotten Crimes: The Holocaust and People with Disabilities,” which they promote as a “first step” to understanding the issues. The figure of one million comes from this pamphlet, which judiciously explains the problems with determining an acceptable figure; 1–2. A recent documentary, Liebe Perla, explores the story of a girl of short stature who survived Josef Mengele’s experiments. For more information on the film, go to http://philosophy.la.psu.edu/ethics/liebe_perla.htm.

84 Branson and Miller, Damned for Their Difference, 33.

85 Horst Biesold, Crying Hands: Eugenics and Deaf People in Nazi Germany (Washington, D.C., 1999).
the “Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases” passed in 1933. This tragedy came about largely through the energetic help of teachers and principals in deaf institutions, since many repeatedly informed on their students. Meanwhile, physicians and social workers also did their part, meaning that professionals played a far greater role in denouncing their deaf charges than the German public did. Moreover, the leading German deaf organization, the REGEDE, largely sympathized with the Nazis, thereby undermining the deaf community at its core.

Because this book comes to us through so many filters (traumatic memories from childhood, transcriptions of sign language translated into spoken German, German into English, a dissertation into a book, a book itself substantially revised for an American readership), evaluating it for anything but the chilling stories themselves seems almost futile. Before meeting Biesold, these victims’ shame about their deafness and their fate kept many from revealing to anyone that they had been forcibly sterilized. The pages upon pages filled with accounts of betrayal both intimate and bureaucratic thus come through with such force that attempting to summarize them or single out examples would never do them justice. And Biesold himself seems not to have found the right tone, since his narrative of the events seems both too distant yet also too close as it weaves awkwardly in and out of his informants’ past and present lives. Not quite a study, then, Crying Hands is an experience, a riveting account. Here, hundreds and hundreds of deaf people tell their stories—without the aid of literary conventions and without the backing of a wider world that has joined them in their outrage. Even as mediated history, this is raw stuff that forces us to suspend analysis until such a time as more studies of disability in the past can give us a deeper understanding of how humans deal with their relationship to difference.

In many respects, Sophia Rosenfeld’s densely argued and impressively researched study, A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France, serves as a model for how deafness might be lifted from heroic or victim status and fruitfully applied to studying mainstream history. An intellectual historian, Rosenfeld provides a sophisticated exploration of how beginning in the 1740s Enlightenment philosophes and French revolutionaries came to understand the role of language as a political tool, and ends her story with some observations about the early decades of the nineteenth century. In their search for a pure, universal language that would speak to all French citizens without ambiguity, a number of thinkers looked to forms of communication that did not rely on the written or spoken word. While experiments in pantomime theater and the obscure rituals of Freemasons receive some attention, the real focus of the book (and presumably contemporaries) was the sign language of the deaf that Abbé de l’Epée tried to make more like written French in the 1760s and 1770s. Each week, Épée invited the Parisian elites to attend demonstrations of how his deaf pupils were being transformed from a “savage” to a “civilized” state through sign language. Inspiring, and appealing for sentimental reasons, these public classes had a significant impact on hearing intellectuals’ discussions regarding the creation of a new, revolutionary French language that they hoped might be untainted by

86 Sophia Rosenfeld, A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France (Stanford, Calif., 2001).
manipulation and abuse. As the revolution wore on and ended in disillusionment, the ideas of language as panacea evolved in such a way that signs no longer captured the intellectual imagination. In the end, the drive toward attaching concrete, precise meanings to words took center stage in a nation coming to terms with new forms of political participation and citizenship. 87

Though clearly not deaf history, A Revolution in Language casts deafness in a leading role. In fact, the study of deafness is what allows Rosenfeld to reevaluate the place of language in the political culture of the French Revolution in the first place, and is what gives the book much of its originality and depth. By making deafness central to her discussion and argument, she has brought the subject into the mainstream in a way that a study focused exclusively on deafness never could. Rosenfeld should be commended for showing how central and enlightening such “marginal” perspectives can be in analyzing topics seemingly far outside of deaf and disability history. But her approach also raises questions about the problematic relationship between disability and historical agency. If deafness has a leading role in this study, deaf people do not—just as they rarely did at the time, when even the best-intentioned teachers and intellectuals used them to advance their pet theories and projects. The fact remains that, until recently, disability entered into discussions of the past only when scholars or contemporaries regarded it as having utility for non-disabled people. Like the sidekick who never gets the girl but who causes the romantic lead to discover love, disability is too often the unacknowledged enabler that helps define and construct the social order. Each time communities banished them, charities helped them, socialites pitied them, institutions cured or abused them, schools trained them, governments assisted them, medicine treated them, or sterilization destroyed them, disabled people became unwitting participants in the redemption of the non-disabled who struggled to secure their own status as “natural” or “normal.”

Thus, while A Revolution in Language does much to show how disability history need not be limited to a history of a particular condition, by excluding deaf people it misses a valuable opportunity to be truly revolutionary in how it approaches ideas of historical agency. Much recent scholarship has not only aimed to give agency to groups previously excluded but has also sought to show how the interplay between the actors and the acted-upon has blurred the boundaries between them and therefore complicated our approaches to historical process. 88 We know from Rosenfeld’s impressive fifty-page bibliography, for example, that the famous pupils of the great deaf educators left autobiographies that reveal considerable discord and much insight about the place and meaning of language. What impact did they have on their teachers, and how did this shape the public image of deafness more broadly in the swirling controversies over language? Certainly, deaf people

87 Serendipitously, Jill Lepore used discussions of deafness to explore similar issues across the Atlantic in A Is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States (New York, 2002). Written for a more mainstream readership than Rosenfeld’s study, the book devotes chapters to Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Alexander Graham Bell to show how deafness—first through sign language and later in attempts to teach deaf people to speak—entered into the creation of a national language alongside studies of Native American languages and Morse code. See chaps. 4 and 7.

88 Rachael Adams, Sideshow U.S.A., offers an especially good example of this practice applied to the study of disability.
themselves had different ideas about sign language than the hearing people who used it for their own purposes, thereby creating a fascinating give and take as students and teachers struggled to define not just the meaning of language but its essence for their very survival.89

EXPLORING IMAGES OF BLINDNESS and blind people in a medieval Islamic society, Fedwa Malti-Douglas both highlights and challenges many assumptions about disability in the West.90 For this reason, a careful look at her article “Mentalités and Marginality” seems an appropriate way to conclude an essay that, because of the present nature of the field, has focused almost exclusively on Western Europe and the United States since 1700. Not only will this force readers to see themselves as products of their times, it also hints at a scholarly world waiting to be discovered for all historians, regardless of geographic or chronologic focus.

Even with fluid definitions of disability embodied in a document like the ADA, Western ideas seem rigid compared to how a society ruled by former slave soldiers between 1250 and 1517 described blind people. Just as the Inuit have many words for snow, the Mamlûks had no fewer than five common terms for blindness. While this stemmed from the greater prevalence of eye conditions, Malti-Douglas explains, “the visually handicapped formed part of the background of social life” in Mamlûk Egypt and Syria, just as they did in Islamic societies more broadly.91 To be sure, they faced stigmatization and exclusion, as evidenced by al-Mawardi’s influential Ordinances of Government dating from the eleventh century, which listed “sound hearing, vision, and speech so that perception could serve as a basis for action” among its seven conditions of eligibility for supreme leadership.92 Still, stereotypes and expectations differed from Western ones. In this sophisticated medieval society, blind men93 belonged to a category of people we would now consider disabled—it included “the lame,” “idiots,” the paralyzed, and sometimes the deaf. But the group also encompassed many who were simply physically different, such as people with bad breath, blue eyes, wall-eyes, flat noses, and large mouths. More often, blind men seemed to fall in a category with beggars and women, thereby making them socially marginal but not necessarily regarded as “disabled.” Furthermore, the culturally laden associations between blindness and darkness central to Western thinking (which have little to do with the reality of no vision) did not exist in Islamic tradition, where it was described simply in terms of “a covering.” Understood in this way, blindness meant a physical reality (loss of sight) rather than a devalued form of mental or spiritual difference. These contrasts suggest the contingent, contextual nature of disability, and call the relatively recent dominance of apparent “givens” like the medical model into question.

89 For a perspective on how deaf people thought about language, see Mirzoeff, Silent Poetry, 30–89; and Lane, When the Mind Hears.
93 Malti-Douglas notes that “blind women receive scant attention in the sources”; “Mentalités and Marginality,” 226.
Malti-Douglas’s study of the non-Western and pre-modern Mamlûk society also invites speculations about where disability should sit in the relationship to other “Others.” Regarding gender, a number of different Islamic texts throughout the period linked blind men to sighted women, not just in terms of social categories but also in matters related to physicality and sexuality. Unlike in the West, where blind personages such as Oedipus, the Theban wise man Teiresias, and Homer have “spiritual vision” to compensate them for their blindness, according to Malti-Douglas, Islamic tradition grants the blind man special qualifications in the sexual realm. Various proverbs such as describing someone as “more virile than a blind man” celebrated sexuality in positive terms. This offers a striking contrast with the growing literature on gender and disability in the West that shows how positive sexuality exists only for the non-disabled. For the blind, this prejudice runs particularly deep; prevailing Western attitudes have equated loss of vision with sexual transgression and interpret it as a form of castration. But drawing connections between blind men and eunuchs, Islamic writers saw sexuality and vision as two opposite yet complementary poles in which “what is missing from one is increased in the other.” “This should lay to rest the conception that such notions derive in any direct manner from the physical realities of blindness,” Malti-Douglas concludes. “It should also call into question the Freudian variant of this position, that such notions are based upon universal psychological laws.” With little known about how Islamic society dealt with blind women, it would be difficult to speculate about how multiple oppressions worked, or indeed if the Mamlûks understood hierarchies in terms of overlapping, competing “Others” as in the West. But Malti-Douglas provides enticing clues that suggest different rules. Even if the Mamlûks marginalized blind men by linking them to women, the notion of sexuality being a positive compensation for blindness surely tempered this outsider status. This would make it hard to imagine a society like that of the Mamlûks comprehending, let alone accepting, how their neighbors to the west would establish relational identities among race, gender, sexuality, and disability. And it would be even harder for them to fathom interpretive frameworks like Baynton’s “disability as justification for inequality” that see disability as an integral part of marginality, a category that trumps other forms of oppression, or, in the words of literary theorists David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, as “the master trope of human disqualification.”

That Islamic societies embraced a different kind of hierarchy does not contra-


98 Mitchell and Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis, 3.
dict or even diminish what scholars have learned about disability in the West. Rather, this peek into one pre-modern, non-Western culture should inspire a more critical evaluation of how all societies approach physical difference. Closer to home, we need more studies that explore intersections between disability and race, both for the many theoretical and analytic insights this could offer and for the important stories that need to be told.99 Meanwhile, armed with the new awareness brought through disability studies, historians who explore the rest of the globe might take stock of where disability fits in with what they already know, both in terms of what they study and their own Western-formed assumptions. Quite likely, a disability studies paradigm designed in, and applied to, the modern West might not make sense in many situations. Yet the experiences of the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America all have much to teach people studying disability from an American or West European perspective, for the roles of science, religion, family, and government often differ from our Western encounters and expectations.100 We


might make similar claims regarding the pre-modern Western world, where disability was also ubiquitous while scholarship on the subject is not.101

Malti-Douglas ends her article by analyzing two seemingly different jokes about blind people.102 Explaining that "verbal cleverness is one of the leitmotifs of medieval Arabic adab literature," she frames the anecdotes within a broader appreciation for oral culture. But, more important, she says, we need to think about them from the point of view of blindness. In one joke, a sighted man asks a blind one: "God has never removed the two eyes of a believer without substituting some good for them. So with what did He compensate you?" The blind man replies: "With not having to see disagreeable people like you." More involved, the second joke turns on a similar confrontation in which a sighted man provokes his blind companion, only to be stunned into silence by the blind man's reply. Like many of the scholars I have reviewed in this essay, Malti-Douglas uses popular culture to explore the borders between marginality and normality, ultimately demonstrating how Mamlük society probed hierarchies by questioning sighted people's assumed superiority. Not only has Malti-Douglas shown how a role reversal occurred but—much along the lines of "inclusion" that many seek today—she also explains how the jokes "argue for an integrative attitude toward the visually handicapped." More important still, she points out that the lesson comes "not in the mouth of some benevolent sighted authority but in that of the blind individual himself." Despite the differences between East and West, and despite the time that has elapsed since people could laugh at these jokes, they still provoke a curl of the lip and a wink of the eye. Maybe throughout history, everyone knows that disabled people ultimately have the last laugh as they taunt the social order. And surely at some level, they also realize that disability is not just another "Other": it reveals and constructs notions of citizenship, human difference, social values, sexuality, and the complex relationship between the biological and social worlds.


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