

Editors

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INTRODUCTION

This special issue of the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* is dedicated to the memory of Tobin Siebers.

Two years ago Tobin wrote to the editors of the *JCRT* offering the journal the opportunity to publish "The Mad Woman Project: Disability and the Aesthetics of Human Disqualification." An essay that was part of a larger book project, "The Mad Woman Project" has been presented in varying forms at a number of speaking events including lectures at Vassar College, Scripps College, Stanford University, and University of Notre Dame. We offer this essay in the memory of Tobin Siebers and his immeasurable contribution to the field of disability studies.

Our Spring 2016 special issue finds its release almost exactly ten years from the date that the *JCRT* published Siebers's "Disability Aesthetics" in our Spring/Summer Issue of 2006, and a little over a year since Tobin's passing in January of 2015. The "Mad Woman Project", much like Siebers's "Disability Aesthetics" (2006) foretells of a rich project yet to be.

"Disability Aesthetics" (2006) would culminate in a field-defining book by the same name in 2010. Engaging with aesthetics and what it can tell us about how we value and devalue individuals, *Disability Aesthetics* brought together modern art and aesthetic judgment to offer a rich theoretical history of our visual culture and its ties to disability. Much like this seminal text, "The Mad Woman Project" explores the response of some bodies to other bodies

In "The Mad Woman Project" Siebers addresses aesthetic disqualification as a concern not simply for artists and art theorists, but as the grounds for understanding human relations. Because art is so intimately tied to feelings rather than disinterest, as Siebers argues in *Disability Aesthetics*, he proposes that we contemplate human disqualification through the lens of aesthetic practice. "I wish to claim that art works, because they so intensely focus our attention on feelings, are unmatched as resources for ways in which disqualification relates to aesthetic principles in everyday life," writes Siebers (5). Like Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Staring: How We Look*, "The Mad Woman Project" suggests that we can learn a lot from everyday encounters between bodies and our bodily responses, whether they be repulsion, attraction, or something else. These encounters are immediate and ephemeral, hardly the stuff of easy contemplation if only because of the speed of our interactions. It is in the arena of artistic contemplation, however, that we are encouraged to "discuss the feelings that other bodies inspire in us" (Siebers 4).

Through a careful and compelling analysis of Park Young-Sook's *Mad Women Project*, Siebers turns our attention to aesthetic responses and their importance to understanding social relations. A South Korean artist and activist, Park Young-Sook's *Mad Women Project* consists of eight series of photographs in which women of varying backgrounds are shown in "states" of madness—lost in contemplation, poorly dressed, disheveled and unfit for social relations. Playing with the idea of what it means to "look" or "appear" mad, both Sook and Siebers challenge us to assess how we "read" disability on the body's surface and, more importantly, how these "readings" continue to inform our medical, social, and legal relations.

Taking up disability and its representation, the articles in this special issue bring together the fields of literary studies, art, religious studies, film criticism, and cultural studies to contemplate disability and its multiple appearances. Though differing in subject matter, each article finds common ground in their indebtedness to the work of Tobin Siebers.

In "Peeking Under the Veil: Niki de Saint Phalle's *The Bride And/As Feminist Disability Aesthetics*" Ann Fox considers the value of feminist disability studies and its application to art criticism. Attending to the work of French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle (1930-2002), Fox focuses on Saint Phalle's *The Bride* addressing its representation of embodiment, female oppression, and disability. Offering a fuller account of Saint Phalle's biography and her body of work, Fox examines the generative force of disability and its influence on the "nascent disability aesthetic" of Niki de Saint Phalle (29).

Colbey Emmerson Reid's "The Grottesche Designs of H.G. Wells (Or, Crippling Style)" recuperates the history of *grottesche* design to consider how aesthetic principles have accounted for hybridity and disfigurement in ways that mainstream culture has not. Noting that the *grottesche* "destabilizes ... essentialist distinctions" between bodies (organic or inorganic), Reid offers a compelling account of the prosthetic quality of bodies (42). Exploring the *grottesche's* presence in the writing of trained draper and author H.G. Wells, this interdisciplinary essay recasts Wells's science fiction novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau* as a *grottesche* engagement with what it means to be human.

Rebecca Sanchez's "'Perfect Interdependency' ": Representing Crip Futurity in Beckett's *Mercier and Camier*" pushes literary criticism and its engagement with disability. As Sanchez notes, the analysis of representations of disability often entails highlighting the symbolic use of disability, as well as the ablest logic that informs its portrayal. This article helpfully transcends these modes of identification to consider the value of disability epistemology in Samuel Beckett's *Mercier and Camier*. As Sanchez points out, Beckett moves beyond the fantasy of individuality and autonomy towards a crip futurity that is marked by a "dis-identificatory" politics.

In "Is the AU in Autism the AU in Autonomy" Joseph Valente explores the ways in which autism has become a "repository of a liberal myth of individualism" (84). Outlining narratives of normative childhood development, from Hans

Asperger and Leo Kanner's accounts of the asocial autistic child to the genre of the bildungsroman and its account of subject formation to representations of development in autistic memoirs and autobiographies, Valente outlines the way autism has been understood as both an abnormality in sociality and as an expression of "autonomous individuality." Turning to the proliferation of autistic memoirs and autobiographies, Valente explores the genre's articulation of self-cultivation in conjunction with its promise of an authentic and autonomous subject.

In "Narratives of Overcoming: Disability Theory and *The Crash Reel*" Joseph M. M. Aldinger speaks to narratives of overcoming through the lens of sports and their media representation. Analyzing Lucy Walker's 2014 documentary *The Crash Reel*, this essay addresses the risk of injury in extreme sports alongside the fantasy of the hyperable, autonomous athlete. Aldinger presents *The Crash Reel* as an alternative disability narrative that resists sentimentalizing disability and the athlete's triumphant return to instead examine issues of embodiment for injured athletes.

Sharon Betcher's "Crip/tography: Disability Theology in the Ruins of God" refers to what Betcher names the "emergent crip of postapocalyptic times" (99). Addressing post-apocalyptic literature and its attention to disability as a "pervasive condition within sociality" rather than an exceptional and pitiable condition, Betcher considers what the crip might have to tell us about living in the wake of what theology has referred to as the "Death of God" (98).

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