

Review of *Reading Embodied Citizenship: Disability, Narrative, and the Body Politic* by Emily Russell, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2011

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Emily Russell's study, *Reading Embodied Citizenship: Disability, Narrative, and the Body Politic*, unhinges the naturalized body of liberal individualism. She discusses disability as it has been figured in twentieth century literary texts, arguing that bodies are both "real," material sites of identity and yet also discursively constructed through reiterative social and textual practices. In fact in her Introduction, Russell points out that the ADA acknowledges "that embodiment is not straightforward medical fact; the body is not simply a self-evident, physical truth" (2). Instead, disabled bodies are politically potent social and symbolic sites open to a variety of discursive representations.

These bodies are excluded from the able-bodied norm, existing as a constitutive outside. As such, disability prompts regulatory images that seek to contain it as pathological, grotesque, or pathetic.

Russell begins her book with the ADA and the history of disability studies, tracing the legal and social advocacy for disabled citizens. She links this politically fraught disabled body with textual representations in American literature. This version of embodiment, then, becomes a rhetorical topos, a discursive site, both physically present and symbolically and textually potent.

Russell develops this embodied site of the disabled as a material and discursive place capable of destabilizing the regulations of oppressive ideology. She argues that discursively configured sites of crippled, freakish, and grotesque bodies offer unruly and risky openings for the interpretation of bodies generally. She analyzes disabled bodies in the novels she treats as places of unauthorized materiality from which speaking and thinking are uncertain and unguaranteed, yet potentially capable of undoing the oppressive regimes of individualism.

For instance, Russell shows us that the grotesque can function to claim a new topography of the body. Careful to first warn that by itself "the emphasis on discourse in social constructionism empties out the corporal experiences of disability," (72) Russell extends the argument: balancing the physical, the textual, and the social body. A keen analyst, she stands poised among these bodies, calling for a new reading of the disabled body—not as clichéd symbol, but as both material and textual, both physical and symbolic.

Demonstrating this multiple reading practice at the conclusion of her chapter on McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Russell points out that the "grotesque body carries with it a constant tension between the turn to the abstract and the turn to the material." She goes on to argue that this body "carries the burden" of both its materiality and its abstractions—textual, symbolic and social (96). This disabled body is not

"essential." It is a richly confused, multiply articulated, contested site, precisely the place out of which might be produced a powerful politics and a speaking activism.

This intersection of the physical body, the textual record of the body, and social regard of this body is importantly a site of material and discursive struggle. Thus Russell articulates disabled bodies that are materially sighted as grotesque, freakish, or otherwise suspect and also discursively cited as icons of the other—that which, *by contrast*, defines a safe and leveling norm. Russell's argument is a fertile conjunction which offers a partially essential site around which a politics of the disabled body can form.

In her chapters on novels of disabled veterans of the Vietnam War and on two Twain novels, Russell focuses sharply on the history of the grotesque body and its origin in individualism, on one hand, and social uniformity, on the other. Her first chapter looks at the nineteenth century precursors to the disability narratives at the center of the book with an analysis of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Those Extraordinary Twins*. In the later chapter on the political impact of disabled veterans, the mutilated soldier's body takes the political/textual stage.

Russell's chapter on *My Year of Meats* and *Geek Love* shift focus to the reproductive body. She argues that "these novels conceive of America through the logic of embodiment and furthermore that each work offers up a disability-inspired reconsideration of reproduction in imagining how to populate the national body" (133).

The next chapter on David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* examines methods of reading the body as a "corporal assembly" rather than as "natural and ahistorical." Russell says, "unusual physical bodies provide a model for reading the textual body and vice versa" (170). Here literary criticism allies itself with cultural critique and political activism to revise the notion of the disabled body and to underwrite a keen analysis of Wallace's notoriously difficult experimental fiction.

Throughout her book, Russell reminds us that disabled bodies have been strictly bound to particular certified versions of themselves as bodies, politically, socially, and textually. Other versions are unavailable or viewed as dangerous. However, as the disabled body becomes strategic, rather than an unquestionable natural category, its materiality becomes revisable. These bodies are not clear and simple, not static, not identical among disabled people, and not by any means free of cultural constructions, withholdings, erasures, and ideological machinations, as Russell takes pain to show. The disabled body has been excluded as unthinkable, continuously forced into exclusion, an oppression that in fact gives life to the able-body, the everybody, the thinkable body. But despite its unthinkable status, the excluded always presses in. The withheld, disobedient or excluded versions echo in symbolic confusions of strictly scripted norms and conventional ideals.

The power of the disabled body, Russell argues, is in its ability to make plain the intractability of that which lies outside the predictable expectations of social norms.

Russell concludes that “embodiment is a mutable discursive and material category shaped by the reading practices of a no less dynamic social body” (198). *Reading Embodied Citizenship* employs an analysis of discourse and the material body to reveal the regulatory codes that restrict thought at the regulated site of disability: the body foreclosed and rigidified into a sight—a spectacular curiosity, a site that generates “the simultaneous need to stare and to look away” (103). But this site of the disabled body is not static; it is a dynamic process--more complex and slippery than the simple, medicalized disabled body.

Finally, Russell demonstrates how discursive constructions of the disabled body appear at the intersections of political, social, juridical, and literary discourse. The effect is that the singular "universalized" Disabled Body proliferates at the intersections where material bodies and discursive construction of disability come together.