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Disability and Modern Fiction: Charting New Territory

On 15 September 2005, the statue *Alison Lapper Pregnant* by Marc Quinn was unveiled by the Mayor of London, Ken Livingston, at a public ceremony in Trafalgar Square (Figure 1). The work is a portrait of Alison Lapper: naked and pregnant. Lapper, an artist born without arms and with shortened legs due to a congenital disorder, is sculpted in smooth, white marble. The sculpture occupied the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square for eighteen months. It is huge: over three metres tall and thirteen tons in weight.

This representation of a disabled female body provoked uproar in the British media. For many journalists, it was the subject matter, rather than the craftsmanship of the sculpture that was problematic. On the day of the unveiling, *The Evening Standard* denounced *Alison Lapper Pregnant* as ‘repellent’.¹ Roy Hattersley, a prominent Labour politician, led this media backlash against ‘political correctness gone mad’ objecting to ‘the suggestion that we have to be taught about the disabled’.² Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian* summed up a widespread sense of ambivalence with his claim that ‘it falls short of being art’.³

This book, which sets out to explore the representation of disability in the fiction and criticism of William Faulkner, Toni Morrison and J. M. Coetzee, takes Jones’s question of whether the disabled body is a valid subject for aesthetic representation as a point of departure. The media reaction to the Alison Lapper statue suggests on-going anxiety about potentially sensationalist exploitations of the disabled body (and Lapper’s own unborn child), but also a wider unease about the process of *representing* personal experiences of disability in a public discourse or space. Jones’s rejection of the statue raises several fundamental questions: What constitutes aesthetic value? What does it mean, both ethically and politically, to bring marginalized bodies to the centre
of debate and to open up these aesthetic representations for critical analysis and public scrutiny? To what extent does this statue by an able-bodied man, Marc Quinn, raise questions about the problem of sympathizing with or imagining a pain which is not one's own?

In Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), the central character connects the idea of obscenity with public representation. She defines the word: ‘Obscene. That is the word, a word of contested etymology…She chooses to believe that obscene means off-stage. To save our humanity, certain things that we may want to see…must remain off-stage.’ She employs the concept as a talisman. For Elizabeth, the salvation of humanity is assured by the exclusion of disruptive presences, by a blinkered gaze which purposefully ignores that which it wishes to scrutinize. While she hopes to ‘hold onto’ static concepts and fixed meanings, the certainty of Elizabeth’s position is undercut by the inherent instability,
malleability (and historical contingency) of language and unseen presences that wait in the wings.

Like the Lapper statue, this study seeks to bring to centre stage representations of disability which may, in the past or in the present, be perceived as obscene or unrepresentable. Despite the fact that representations of disability have been at the centre of aesthetic practice throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, until recently they have been marginalized in critical practice. In universities, higher education for disabled students has been a high-profile priority, yet disability studies has, in the United Kingdom in particular, been largely excluded from the curriculum.

The media coverage of the Alison Lapper statue highlights the wider, paradoxical place of the disabled in the history of aesthetic representation and critical reception. In his newspaper article, Hattersley suggests that 'Trafalgar Square is for something else.' Hattersley's objection is primarily historical: Lapper's status as an ordinary, relatively anonymous citizen means that she does not qualify for memorialization alongside national heroes such as, for example, Nelson, Shakespeare or Milton. On the other hand, Jones, an art critic, expresses his concern in aesthetic terms: far from being too ordinary, Lapper's extraordinary body is not deemed a suitable subject for art. Art is implicitly understood as a practice that excludes material which is perceived to be overtly political or aesthetically 'obscene'. The personal may be political, bold and brave, but it is certainly not viewed as beautiful. These views suggest a distinctly conservative sense that art must not be disruptive and that heroic historical figures should be privileged over the materiality of everyday lives.

The Daily Telegraph article on the Lapper statue opened with the question: ‘Whatever would Nelson think?’ ignoring the fact that the statue of Nelson, exhibited on a column in the centre of Trafalgar Square for more than 150 years, depicts a disabled, war-wounded soldier, blind in one eye and missing an arm. This neatly highlights the extent to which disability, while prevalent in literary and artistic representations throughout the centuries, has remained, until recently, a critical blind spot. Standing alongside the Lapper Statue, Nelson's heroic white masculinity becomes reconfigured. The hierarchy of embodiment (and disability) implicit in the media response is clear: Nelson’s disability, inflicted rather than congenital, is understood as a symbolic badge of military honour rather than as a marker of physical vulnerability. The visceral reaction against the representation of Lapper's pregnant, naked body suggests taboos about both the equalization of a disabled female
body and Lapper’s prospective role as a physically fertile, socially productive carer – a mother – rather than a passive recipient of care. In this context, the recognition of the presence of disability creates new connections and enriches our understanding of existing aesthetic works, including the Nelson statue. So, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* needs to be read in a wider, richer history of artistic representation, in the context for example of such works as the armless *Venus de Milo* (130 BC), as well as for its contemporary political significance in terms of disability rights activism.

It is the statue itself, rather than the negative media coverage of it, which raises the questions that are most pertinent to this book. Lapper’s pregnant body suggests that we might reconceptualize the disabled body as physically, economically, aesthetically and critically productive. But how exactly can the disabled body pose imaginative challenges? Can aesthetic representation help us to better understand the experience of disability? How do able-bodied artists or writers, such as Marc Quinn, Faulkner, Morrison or Coetzee, approach the problems of mediating the experience of disability through their own aesthetic frameworks? What ethical demands are put upon viewers or readers by this process? Can literature, unlike sculpture, offer the possibility of empathizing or even entering the consciousness of another? And how does the malleability of language as a medium contrast to the stark marble of Quinn’s sculpture?

The assimilation over time of a wide range of personal, public, medical and legal understandings under the modern heading ‘disability’, poses both problems and possibilities for literary critics, policy-makers, carers and those who identify themselves as disabled. In his unveiling speech, Ken Livingstone sought to position Lapper as both disabled and empowered, a ‘modern heroine’. In a literary context, this desire to identify positive role models in relation to disability has led to some instrumental and crudely political critical approaches. This book draws on a range of more recent and nuanced approaches to ‘literary disability’, to make connections between authors from different time periods and backgrounds and explore shifting understandings of disability between 1920 and the present day. Disability is treated as a culturally and historically specific concept.

Coetzee’s *Slow Man* (2005) self-consciously considers these questions through its engagement with a history of sculpture, portraiture and disability in the context of the novel. The central character, Paul, who is recovering from the amputation of his leg following a bicycle accident, rails against the contradictory aesthetic and cultural ideals that surround him:
Does he really want to feel natural? … Does the Venus of Milo feel natural? Despite having no arms the Venus of Milo is held up as an ideal of feminine beauty… Yet if it were discovered tomorrow that the Venus was in fact modelled on an amputee, she would be removed at once to a basement store. Why? Why can the fragmentary image of a woman be admired but not the image of a fragmentary woman, no matter how neatly sewn up the stumps?¹¹

Paul therefore identifies both a prevailing stigmatization of disability, but also a gap in existing aesthetic theories of the beautiful in relation to impairment. The novel as a whole explores the idea that amputation and prosthesis are not just physical or medical matters of ‘sew[ing] up the stumps’ (59), but also need to be considered in terms of their complex and intersecting aesthetic, ethical and emotional significance.

Certain critics have made claims about the potential for literature, more than any other art form, to allow a more subtle engagement with the complexities of disabled people’s experiences. Snyder and Mitchell argue that the ‘characteristic intimacy with disabled characters in literature’, achieved through first-person narrative perspectives, allows ‘a unique space for contemplating the complexity of physical and cognitive differences’.¹² Their argument that literature by definition ‘makes disability a social, rather than a medical phenomenon’ (6) suggests a privileging of the literary over any other modes of accessing interior, personal experiences.

Derek Attridge, writing from a more general perspective on literature and ethics, makes a similar claim about the potential for literature to allow a perspective from the interior space of a character:

[Literary works] are capable of taking us through an intense experience of these other-directed impulses and acts. The inventive literary work, therefore, should be thought of as an ethically charged act.¹³

Yet, in Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee the experimentation with marginalized perspectives – of physically and cognitively impaired characters but also women, slaves and the dead – whilst ‘other-directed’ in an ethical sense also has the potential to be aesthetically exploitative and politically complex.

The representation of disability is not then a minority concern restricted to disability rights activism or the critical genre of disability studies. The fact that the ethical, aesthetic and imaginative challenges implicit in the
representation of the disabled body are central to three of the most pop-
ular, celebrated authors of the twentieth century – Faulkner, Morrison
and Coetzee, all Nobel laureates – is significant. Although this topic has
received little attention to date other than in disability studies itself, a
focus on representations of literary disability can enrich our understand-
ing of individual texts by Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee and suggest
new connections between them. Do impaired and invalid bodies ‘fall
short of being art’? How can a literary focus on disability work as a
valid category of critical investigation? Can disability provide a perspec-
tive that draws upon and contributes to critical understandings of a wide
spectrum of bodily experience and aesthetic representation and avoids
universalizing the differences between people?

This book sets out to offer close readings of key texts alongside an
exploration of the diverse contributions to public debates about dis-
ability that Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee have made as academics,
curators, essayists and public intellectuals. The study draws on historical
and cultural contexts from the periods in which the authors were writ-
ing, ranging from the Louvre’s catalogue for Morrison’s *Foreign Bodies*
exhibition (2006) to the will of Alfred Nobel (1895).

In an interview, Alison Lapper suggested that the representation of her
body at a moment of proud maternity implies a kind of confrontation:
‘Anything we’re uncomfortable with, we avoid. But now I’m up there,
11ft, you can’t avoid me anymore.’ Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee
also confront these taboos and, through their diverse critical and fic-
tional representations, refuse to look away from the disabled body itself.
Their works explore not only the sense of public discomfort in relation
to disability that Lapper describes, but also shifting conceptions of
health, beauty and the struggle to represent the materiality of the body
in writing.

**Conceptualizing disability studies**

The discipline of disability studies is often traced back to the 1970s
when the focus on literary texts was closely aligned with the politi-
cal aims of the disability rights movement. In this period, notions of
the *effect* of literary representations of disability were polarized; litera-
ture was viewed either as a source of liberation or as directly colluding
with structures of oppression by using disability as ‘a deterministic vehi-
cle of characterization’. Moreover, the role of *affect*, an inescapable
emotional and ethical dimension to any engagement with representa-
tions of disability, was often ignored in the quest for intellectual
authority and academic recognition. The intersection between disability activism and the feminist, gay and black civil rights movements in this period provided shared, alternative models for understanding identity and more politicized modes of reading (or re-reading) texts. Henri-Jacques Stiker argues that these interconnected movements constituted a wider, cultural ‘grand examination’ that provided a specific historical point of departure for disability studies in 1970s America.

This book argues for a far wider conception of disability studies. In fact, the study of literary representations of disability can be traced further back than the 1970s. In 1926, for example, Helen MacMurphy wrote *The Almosts*. The text begins by suggesting an exchange between literary representation and scientific discourses:

> Sometimes the poet sees more than the scientist, even when the scientific man is playing at his own game. The novelist can give a few points to the sociologist, and the dramatist to the settlement worker.

This opening calls for communication across disciplines but also emphasizes the complexity of literary texts and their potential to deepen our understanding. MacMurphy focuses on the representation of disability in the work of some of the most well-known authors of her period:

> Take the case of the feeble-minded. They have been drawn from life more than once by the great masters already mentioned [Shakespeare and Scott], as well as by Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Charles Reade, and many other writers, and yet so far at least we do not seem to have taken mentally defective persons in the world as seriously as the great writers who immortalized Wamba, Quasimodo, Barnaby Rudge, Young Sparkler, Mr. Toots and others. (1; my italics)

She traces the concept of ‘feeble-mindedness’ through the literary great masters of the past including the fool in Shakespeare’s plays, back to the Domesday Book. MacMurphy’s concern is with social change; she urges the state to ‘stop neglecting the mentally defective and reorganize charitable institutions, education’ (177). Yet, her analysis is rooted in the details of the texts themselves. She emphasizes the humanity of disabled characters, and the potential for textual representation to foster a sense of similarity and empathy rather than difference: ‘They are human creatures – human beings, and differ among themselves in
reactions, in character, in endowment, in emotion, almost as much as the rest of us’ (170). MacMurphy's first-person voice, which implicitly positions both herself and her audience as able-bodied, nevertheless suggests the ways in which literature can particularize and individualize experience. Difference – diverging physical states and characters – paradoxically becomes the point of similarity.

MacMurphy's work about disability took place at a time when mentally traumatized and physically injured American soldiers were returning from the First World War. During the war, the American military's adoption of the Binet Scale as a way of testing and categorizing soldiers had provoked wider anxieties about the 'intelligence' of the population as a whole. Through this system of intelligence testing, a previously unrecognized (or at least uncategorized) class of the 'feeble-minded' became visible in post-war American society. As MacMurphy suggests:

Great writers have recognized the feeble-minded. We must reckon with the mental defective as one of the many things in heaven and earth that are not dealt with by some philosophers, and yet that make a great difference to the community and to social progress.

In some respects, MacMurphy's focus on the literary representations of disability anticipates Virginia Woolf's essay, 'On Being Ill', published in 1930. Like MacMurphy, Woolf identifies a critical gap in the treatment of disability and illness in literature. Both authors echo the language of Hamlet to suggest that disability and invalidity constitute both an 'undiscovered country' and 'one of the many things in heaven and earth' that we have so far failed to explore, even in some of the most well-known literature. For MacMurphy, this gap is between the prevalence of representations of disability and the lack of critical engagement with the topic. For Woolf, there is an absence in contemporary fictional writing about the experience of illness and invalidity:

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it begins, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are disclosed…It becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. (4)

MacMurphy's focus is on character: she identifies examples, such as Dickens's Tiny Tim, where a physically or mentally disabled character
is observed from the outside, narrated by an omniscient narrator. For Woolf, the new territory that writers need to explore is the interior experience of the ‘daily drama of the body [of which] there is no record’ (4). She suggests that the poverty of existing language available to describe physical suffering necessitates linguistic innovation and literary creation: ‘[The sufferer] is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other… so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out… It is a new language we need, more primitive, more sensual, more obscene’ (7). Language is treated here as a material that can be handled or moulded. For Woolf, the sensuality and obscenity of this alternative language roots it in the physical realm, mediated by the body.

Woolf and MacMurphy do not address the same conditions: MacMurphy’s focus is on disability and cognitive impairment. Woolf’s definition of illness is far more ambiguous, ranging from female hysteria to a trip to the dentist, and clearly encompassing allusions to her own suffering from depression, insomnia and various nervous diseases. Yet both authors explore how those who stand outside the ‘army of the upright’ (16), often deemed economically unproductive or culturally invalid, represent uncharted literary and critical territory at the beginning of the twentieth century. Through Shakespearean references, both texts explore disability and invalidity not as a personal tragedy but rather as an imaginative possibility.

At the beginning of the twentieth century then, Woolf invited authors and critics to venture into unexplored imaginative territories of illness and invalid experience. A century later, the fictional and critical landscape is quite different; the taboos that Woolf described have been challenged by, for example, the late twentieth-century explosion in the publication of illness narratives. Tales of illness and disability are far more common: in autobiographical writing and fictional accounts of disabling conditions and ill health, as well as a growing critical field of ‘health humanities’.

Yet, Woolf’s sense of the potential for writing about invalid experience to suggest new modes of perception and narration has not been fully explored. The condition of invalidity, she argues, opens up new modes of knowing and looking. Lying on one’s back, for example, allows a new attention to the shifting beauty of the clouds: ‘We float with the sticks on the stream… irresponsible, disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time in years, to look round, to look up – to look, for example, at the sky’ (12). This peripheral position reveals ‘endless activity… [a] gigantic cinema play[ing] perpetually to an empty house’ (14).
This motif of staring up at the sky also appears in Faulkner’s ‘The Leg’ (1934) and D. H. Lawrence’s ‘The Prussian Officer’ (1914). In both stories, the protagonists are depicted as lying incapacitated and injured, flat on their backs. Faulkner relates a short, fragmented story through the consciousness of David, a British First World War soldier who is injured and has his leg amputated. Lawrence imagines a scene through the eyes of an orderly in the Franco-Prussian war (1870–1) who, following a bitter mental and physical struggle with his officer, falls from his horse and lies dying in the mountains. In both cases, the external action of combat becomes subordinated to the shifting, interior consciousness of the protagonist. Both Lawrence and Faulkner adopt a first-person perspective in which there is a blurring of the ‘line between truth and delirium’.

As in Woolf’s essay, this recumbent position is associated with pain and suffering but also with a mystical, imaginative quality which is captured in the first-person narrative. The soldiers and Woolf’s invalid find themselves in a position where ‘the tools of business [have] grown remote; both their bodies and the world have ‘changed shape’. Woolf’s protagonist discovers new sensitivities and sensory perceptions as a result of her stillness and illness:

The words give out their scent and distil their flavour, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having come to us sensually first, by way of the palate and the nostrils, like some queer odour. (22)

In Lawrence’s story, the landscape is endowed with a similar dream-like beauty in which different senses and memories merge to create an overwhelming impression of ‘solid unreality’ that resembles Woolf’s swirling cinema in the sky: ‘There was thick, golden light behind golden-green glitterings, and tall, grey-purple shafts, and darknesses further off, surrounding him, growing deeper.’

As in Woolf’s essay, there is an awareness of texture, width and depth, ‘thick’, ‘light’ and ‘deep’ darkness (19).

In Faulkner’s ‘The Leg’ the imaginative potential of this recumbent position, in which ‘the mind concocts a thousand legends and romances…for which it has neither time nor taste in health’, takes on a more bitter, delusional edge. The new mental and social division inaugurated by the First World War becomes incorporated into David’s consciousness, as the internal voice is split between himself and the imaginary presence of his dead friend, George. As David lies in the
hospital bed, his senses are sharpened and darkness becomes an almost tangible presence:

And my nights were filled too, with nerve- and muscle-ends chafed now by an immediate cause: the wood and leather leg. But the gap was still there, and sometimes at night, isolated by invisibility, it would become filled with the immensity of darkness and silence despite me. (311)

The prosthetic leg fails to fill the gap in David’s consciousness, or the blank in his memory. In David, Faulkner engages with the fear and anxieties of an individual protagonist, within a wider social and cultural context. The wood and leather leg is an example of the prostheses developed in the First World War and symbolic of the culture of rehabilitation which ‘figur[ed] disability as an anomaly to be made to disappear’. For David, the missing leg also comes to symbolize the death of his friend George, a loss that refuses to be easily prostheticized or replaced: ‘I had lost them both’ (312).

Woolf’s essay and Faulkner’s short story about disability provide a literary starting point for this study, rooted as they are in an early twentieth-century, post-First World War context. Woolf’s metaphor of illness as an undiscovered country is frequently cited and often extended by contemporary disability studies critics. Yet, near the start of the twenty-first century, the metaphor of totally uncharted ground is inaccurate: disability studies and illness narratives are no longer entirely unexplored, but they are still relegated to the margins of critical practice.

As Davis, writing in the preface to the second edition of The Disability Studies Reader (2006), puts it: ‘Just because disability studies is on the map doesn’t mean that it is easy to find’ (xiii). Ato Quayson, thinking along similar lines in Aesthetic Nervousness (2007), suggests that what is needed is ‘a provisional map of interconnections’ (15).

This exchange between literary and the critical forms suggests that disability studies needs to take account of both types of writing. Close analysis of the vocabulary and imagery that are used to define, describe and articulate the experience of disabled people is central to the project of better understanding disability in both literature and culture more widely. There are undoubtedly difficulties posed by the assimilation of physically and geographically diverse experiences under the single heading of ‘disability’. Yet, as Morrison argues in Playing in the Dark (1992), it is important to explore the role of fiction in shaping cultural perceptions and the construction of these labels within a specific historical context.
She describes a reciprocal relationship in which ‘cultural identities are formed and informed by a national literature’.

The challenges that MacMurphy and Woolf set up at the beginning of the twentieth century – to address the lack of critical writing about disability and to explore the imaginative potential of conditions of invalidity – remain significant for twenty-first-century critics. Whilst the growing presence of disability studies on the university curriculum in the United States and the wealth of recent books on disability, the history of medicine, illness narratives and ageing indicate that the role of the invalid in literature is no longer the unmapped critical terrain that Woolf’s metaphor suggests, there is still a great deal to be done. Disability is not a minority concern in demographic, historical or literary terms. This book argues for the importance of disability as a critical approach that needs to be integrated into the academy and mainstream literary criticism, and an important perspective through which we can better understand some of the most celebrated authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The definition of disability

Disability, as a category, is fundamentally unstable. Nineteenth-century notions of ‘disability’ – set against a backdrop of eugenics discourses and the conflation of categories of disabled people with immigrants and the poor – encompassed congenital disorders, sensory impairments and various types of chronic disease. Disability remained both under-theorized and overlooked in policy-making and public spheres.

The interplay between literal and metaphorical, physically and socially disabling factors is also central to twentieth-century institutional definitions of disability. UPIAS (the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, formed in 1976) sought to address this difficulty through the adoption of a dualistic definition, which was employed as a political tool by disability rights activists in the 1970s. This definition makes a clear division between ‘impairment’ as ‘lacking part or all of a limb, having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body’ and ‘disability’ as ‘the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities’. This focus on socially constructed barriers lends itself to political campaigns for architectural and legislative changes. The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), a landmark act that extended the civil rights legislation of 1964 to protect
disabled people from discrimination, was widely celebrated as a victory for campaigns based upon this dualistic definition. Like the medical (impairment) and social (disability) model, the law acknowledges that disability extends beyond a physical or mental medical model to include culturally constructed perceptions of limitation and certain forms of social organization.

Yet, the personal, ethical and affective aspects of these processes of definition deserve closer attention. Iris Marion Young suggests that the instability of the category itself is linked to the potential for anyone to become disabled (as many of us will in old age) and a sense of abjection. The resistance to naming, defining and thinking about ageing and disability that Young describes connects to what Morrison herself calls a ‘fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness . . . of boundarylessness’. In this context, the drawing of boundaries and dualistic definitions takes on an arbitrary quality related to self-definition and reassurance on the part of the able-bodied definers: ‘Encounter with the disabled person,’ Young argues, ‘produces the ambiguity of recognizing that the person whom I project as so different, so other, is nevertheless like me’ (147). These encounters, whether through personal meetings or aesthetic representations, invite an intimate process of self-reflection and provide a challenge to conventional understandings of ‘disability’ as a homogenized category.

In some senses, then, ambiguity and a resistance to naming become defining features of disability as a category. The Oxford English Dictionary (2009) suggests that ‘disability’ as a generalized ‘lack of ability, inability, incapacity, weakness’ is a more common usage than disability as the ‘physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities’ which applies to millions of people around the world. In all of these cases, the underlying question of what capabilities disability is defined against remains unclear. The relationship between ‘the definers . . . and the defined’, which lies at the centre of Morrison’s Beloved, becomes a site of political contestation in disability studies, opening up a gap between medical authority and personal experience to produce both linguistic and ethical ambiguities.

In this context, more nuanced, interactionist models of disability that suggest the interconnectedness of medical and social factors become important as critical tools. In this study, the difficulty of defining disability is a further starting point. The diversity of disabled experience, which can include mobility impairments, sensory deprivation, cognitive disorders, speech problems and ageing, is emphasized to suggest both its prevalence and its importance as a critical category.
If bodily variation and vulnerability constitute a point of similarity for all human beings then disability shifts from an ‘integrable’ perspective to become ‘integral’ to the theorization of the human.  

Such a wide-ranging, shifting definition of disability is at once a problem and an opportunity. Woolf’s ‘On Being Ill’ provides a way of thinking about how distinct separations between body and mind, between medical and social models, are problematic:

Literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear and is...null, and negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. (4)

For Woolf, the body is the mediator of all experience and so is inextricably bound up with the act of writing, reading, sensing and understanding. This study takes the body as a site of knowledge yet also of resistance, a standard which writers, seeking to capture experience and identity, must perpetually come up against. The political efficacy of a division between social and medical models has to be balanced with the danger of physical pain, suffering and embodied experiences disappearing from disability studies. In literary critical terms, the tendency towards abstraction and a focus on linguistic crisis can lead to a mode of analysis in which the body is treated merely as a figure of language. It is only by challenging the boundaries of disability studies, through an exploration of intersections with critical gerontology, aesthetics, linguistics and history, that the discipline can continue to develop.

In her essay, Woolf resists the notion of a Cartesian subject, returning us to the sense that ‘the creature within...cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant’ (4). Given this interconnectedness, literary and cultural representations of disability can facilitate alternative understandings of the lived experience of disabled people. Interactionist perspectives emphasize bodily experience, necessarily mediated through text in a novel or critical essay. They allow a way of thinking about the relation between able-bodied author and the representation of disabled characters, but also about the relation between a text and the specific historical and cultural context in which it was written.

Each of the chapters in this book explores a different form of disability. My aim in adopting this approach is to suggest the diversity and the
ambiguity of the term ‘disability’ within specific historical and cultural contexts. I also locate my own analyses on a wider spectrum of writing about embodiment in general. I do this by exploring cognitive impairment and war-wounded soldiers in my chapter on Faulkner; physical disability and disfigurement in my analysis of Morrison; and sensory deprivation and ageing in relation to Coetzee’s later fiction. The final chapter of the book considers the relationship between materiality and metaphor, and the ethics of using disability as a metaphor in the context of the Nobel Prize lectures of all three authors.

An aesthetic dialogue between Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee

Until now, no literary critical work has undertaken a sustained reading of the works of Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee together. Although some comparative studies exist, particularly between Morrison and Coetzee, the complex interconnections between all three authors and their recurring focus on disabled bodies have not yet been explored. Little critical writing has emerged on the relationship between Coetzee and Faulkner’s writing, although Coetzee himself has published an essay on ‘William Faulkner and his Biographers’ (2005).

Rather than an existing body of critical writing on the topic, it is the authors themselves that invite connections between their works. In 1985 Morrison attended the annual ‘Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha’ conference in Oxford Mississippi. Prior to reading from Beloved, the work-in-progress, Morrison highlighted a complex relationship between her reading and her writing: ‘There was for me not only an academic interest in Faulkner, but…in a very personal way as a reader, William Faulkner had an enormous effect on me.’ As a Masters student at Cornell in 1955, Morrison had written her thesis on ‘Virginia Woolf’s and William Faulkner’s Treatment of the Alienated’. Her fascination with the role of the outsider in a literary tradition, and in Faulkner’s work in particular, is evident in Playing in the Dark, written over thirty years later: ‘I am in awe of the authority of Faulkner’s Benjy…Melville’s Pip, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein – each of us can extend the list’ (4). Here she places Faulkner’s representation of disability, the cognitively impaired Benjy in The Sound and the Fury (1929), alongside other characters who are isolated as a result of physical and mental otherness.

Coetzee’s essay, ‘William Faulkner and his Biographers’, also focuses on disability, this time in the context of Faulkner’s own life.
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the compendious biographical writing on Faulkner, Coetzee chooses to highlight the story of Faulkner’s feigned disability:

He returned to Oxford [Mississippi] wearing an RAF officer’s uniform and sporting a British accent and a limp, the consequence, he said, of a flying accident... He sustained the aviator legend for years; he began to play it down only when he became a national figure and the risk of exposure loomed too large.  

With a kind of puzzled ‘astonishment’ (189) that characterizes the entire essay, Coetzee explores the possibility, raised by certain biographers, that this absurd fiction of his own personal disability marked a turning point in Faulkner’s development, triggering an urge to tell (and write) stories that continued for the rest of his life:

Faulkner’s biographers have made much of his war stories... The ease with which he duped the good people of Oxford, Karl says, proved to Faulkner that... one can make not only a life but a living out of fantasy. (191)

In the same essay, Coetzee describes Faulkner’s literary contribution in unequivocal terms: ‘The one blazing genius of American literature of the 1930s’ (194).

I do not, however, intend to suggest any kind of straightforward influence or similarity between authors from different ethnic and geographical backgrounds, historical periods and with their own personal perspectives. In an interview with Nellie McKay in 1983, Morrison repudiates any simple likeness between her own work and Faulkner’s writing:

I am not like James Joyce; I am not like Thomas Hardy; I am not like Faulkner. I am not like in that sense. I do not have objections to being compared to such extraordinary gifted and facile writers, but it does leave me sort of hanging there when I know that my effort is to be like something.  

Here she insists that her specific identity as a female, black writer should not be erased through assimilation into a wider literary history which is largely dominated by white male authors. This objection to comparison – the endorsement of an African American woman’s writing through its relation to a white male predecessor – responds to
traditional linear readings of Morrison’s work which see it as descending from Faulkner’s ‘master text’.\textsuperscript{58} Harold Bloom, for example, employs a metaphor of family resemblance suggesting that her ‘style stems from an amalgam of Faulkner and Woolf’ who he views as a ‘the father and mother of Morrison’s art’.\textsuperscript{59} This book takes a quite different approach, exploring a dialogic relationship between authors and shifting conceptions of disability across different times and contexts, rather than the notion of literary lineage.

Yet, in their Nobel lectures, Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee all articulate a strong sense of their own place within a wider literary tradition. Faulkner modestly suggested that ‘this award is only mine in trust’.\textsuperscript{60} His acceptance speech not only acknowledged past masters but was also focused on a future generation of ‘young men and woman already dedicated to the same anguish and travail’ (119). Morrison, in her Nobel banquet speech, suggested that previous generations of authors represent an ambiguous, spectral presence, haunting her life and work: ‘I entered this hall pleasantly haunted by those who have entered it before me… That company of Laureates is both daunting and welcoming, for among its lists are names of persons whose work has made whole worlds available to me.’\textsuperscript{61}

Yet despite Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee’s sense of indebtedness, Bloom’s linear formulation seems inadequate. My aim is to suggest fresh, mutually enriching reciprocal relationships between the authors, using the work of each to better understand and explore the representation of disability in the writing of the others. This book therefore sets out to probe points of intersection, as well as of divergence, between Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee’s works. Their recurring representation of disabled bodies that \textit{endure}, that refuse to be removed from view even at the end of their novels and essays, will be central. Morrison’s comment on Faulkner’s work, that there is ‘a sort of staring, a refusal-to-look-away in his writing that I found admirable’,\textsuperscript{62} is a significant feature of the uncompromising, often discomforting yet compelling nature of works by Faulkner, Coetzee and Morrison herself. These authors all examine the problems of representing disability as well as the empathetic challenge that this poses. Morrison suggests that the act of literary imagining is relational and goes beyond the visual: ‘For me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, becoming.’\textsuperscript{63} Literature can provide an enabling perspective through which to enter into this process of becoming another consciousness, but at the same time, it confronts us with the aesthetic, ethical and imaginative limits of this struggle.
Faulkner, Coetzee, and particularly Morrison, also provide critical models for thinking about literature and disability more widely. Like many disability studies critics, Morrison begins *Playing in the Dark* by positing an unspoken presence, in this case of African American characters, ‘at the heart’ (50) of many canonical works of American literature. She argues that: ‘One likely reason for the paucity of critical material on this large and compelling subject is that, in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse’ (9). ‘Evasion,’ she continues, ‘has fostered another, substitute language, in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate’ (9).

There is no longer an absence of writing about race in critical studies just as there is no longer a complete critical silence about disability. Yet, there is still a lack of writing about disability in mainstream literary criticism, particularly in relation to some of the most respected authors of the last century. Morrison’s critical writing on race provides a way of writing about unsettling populations that is not only an act of political resistance, but also a nuanced and productive literary critical approach. In *Playing in the Dark*, she argues that literary representation can both perpetuate and subvert prejudices, but she also suggests that alternative critical approaches might be able to shift our understanding of the place of marginalized populations in a text and in society:

I wanted to identify those moments when American literature was complicit in the fabrication of racism, but equally important, I wanted to see when literature exploded and undermined it… Much more important was to contemplate how the Africanist presence enriched the text …[and] what the engagement meant for the work of the writer’s imagination. (16; my italics)

In using Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* as a model for reading, I am not seeking to conflate race and disability, but rather to explore how Morrison’s perspectives on these matters complicate our understanding of the categories and their place in literary history. As Morrison puts it, celebrating the pleasures and possibilities through new and enriching critical perspectives seems to ‘render the nation’s literature a much more complex and rewarding body of knowledge’.

Morrison’s desire to reconfigure the critical landscape of American literature by focusing on a repressed Africanist presence returns us to Woolf’s metaphor of an ‘undiscovered country’ of invalid experience:
These chapters put forth an argument for extending the study of American literature into what I hope will be a wider landscape. I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World – without the mandate for conquest.66

Drawing on Morrison, MacMurphy and Woolf, I hope in this study to chart new critical territory, to explore the ways in which a focus on the representation of disability shifts our understanding of Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee and the relationship between them, and to contribute to an emerging critical category for examining twentieth-century and twenty-first-century literature and culture.
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