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*Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic
Modernist Literature* by Maren Tova Linett (review)

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212 *Transhumanism* offers an indispensable intellectual history of a movement still in the process of becoming. Former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, a stringent critic of late capitalism, articulates two possible futures for a technocentric society: either we will be consigned to human waste in a technocratic dystopia or we will enter a new utopian phase of human existence in which technological developments have eliminated disease, hunger, and capitalism.⁴ This opposition raises questions about what we value as a globalizing society. While many films and books in recent years have imagined dystopian futures arising out of such technological interventions in the human body—*Blade Runner 2049* being the most recent—Pilsch's book offers a positive outlook of the posthumanist ethos and a nuanced consideration of transhumanism, contributing an important and lucid analysis of the movement's evolution and a theoretical engagement with transhumanism's rhetoric that will prove fascinating to anyone thinking about technology and the human limit.

Notes

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1. For a recent version of his argument about commons, see Slavoj Žižek, "Democracy and Capitalism are Destined to Split Up," YouTube video, 17:19, posted by "Big Think," January 7, 2015, [youtube.com/watch?v=AXVExtZe_w/](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXVExtZe_w/).

2. Nick Bostrom, "Human Genetic Enhancement: A Transhumanist Perspective," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 37, no. 4, (2003): 493–506; Retrieved from nickbostrom.com/ethics/genetic.html/.

3. Mamoru Oshii, director of *Ghost in the Shell*, defended his casting of Johansson by arguing that the character is a cyborg with no defined race or gender. Thus, the body inhabited by a Japanese girl is imagined to represent a universal body, but the racial implications of such a representation are enhanced by the pure whiteness of the artificial body. See Hunter Harris, "Ghost in the Shell's Original Director Mamoru Oshii Doesn't See Scarlett Johansson's Casting As Whitewashing," *Vulture*, March 27, 2017, [sbs.com.au/movies/article/2017/03/27/ghost-shells-original-director-mamoru-oshii-doesnt-see-scarlett-johanssons/](https://www.sbs.com.au/movies/article/2017/03/27/ghost-shells-original-director-mamoru-oshii-doesnt-see-scarlett-johanssons/).

4. Varoufakis discusses the relationship between labor and technology in *The Global Minotaur* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 50–2. He also described this dynamic in a TED talk entitled "Capitalism will Eat Democracy—Unless We Speak Up," TED video, December 2015, [ted.com/talks/yanis_varoufakis_capitalism_will_eat_democracy_unless_we_speak_up/](https://www.ted.com/talks/yanis_varoufakis_capitalism_will_eat_democracy_unless_we_speak_up/).

***Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature.* Maren Tova Linett. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. Pp. 257. \$34.95 (paper); \$34.95 (eBook).**

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What are the stakes of literary encounters with physical difference? Michael Davidson notes that "[A] poetics—as much as a politics—of disability is important: because it theorizes the ways that poetry defamiliarizes not only language but the body normalized *within* language."¹

Literary disability studies discovers meanings that accrue to disabled bodies and how these meanings inflect the trajectory of a narrative and catalyze artistic praxis, foregrounding discursive norms of embodiment as well as departures from them. Disability studies pairs particularly well

with modernism thanks to a shared commitment to articulating as inherently worthy of analysis how individuals experience themselves and others in the world. In exploring the role of disabilities in shaping modernism, Linett complicates an ethics of recognition. As formulated by Hegel, the modern subject is constituted through an intrinsic duality of consciousness: the idealization of an independent and autonomous self and, simultaneously, the awareness that this self is contingent upon experience among others. This inherent duality cannot be reconciled and results in asymmetrical recognition and subordination. The misrecognition of disabled subjects is foundational to understanding both poetics and politics. Linett writes: "I view ableism not exclusively as the disparagement or dehumanization of disabled people, but also as the conviction that disabled people are radically other, that their disabilities, whether congenital or acquired, change them in ways that create a gulf between 'them' and able-bodied 'us'" (7).

Bodies of Modernism is a wide-ranging, capacious, and meticulously researched study spanning 1890 to 1940, exploring modernist prose by more than a dozen writers: Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, H. G. Wells, D. H. Lawrence, Elizabeth Bowen, Henry Green, Olive Moore, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, J. M. Synge, Florence L. Barclay, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce. Unsurprisingly, several of these writers lived with disabilities, yet the book's primary interest lies in the textual bodies embedded within modernist culture and texts, or "how literary depictions of disabled characters help shape cultural ideas (however inaccurate) about how impairments influence subjectivities" (3). Linett's astute readings rely upon the juxtaposition of a wide array of texts and a continual effort to lay bare both the eugenic and counternormative forces at work in a text. In several instances, Linett's analyses draw upon the evolution of manuscript versions. The result is a rather prodigious contribution to modernist and disability studies.

While modernist writers were exploring the role of the body in shaping ways of knowing and experiencing the world, eugenic science and its popularization resulted in pervasive discrimination against people with disabilities. In "These Pushful Days," Douglas Baynton takes stock of its impact: sign language was prohibited in classrooms at schools for the deaf, and deaf people were expected to learn to speak. City ordinances targeting people with visible disabilities proscribed begging; infants with disabilities were commonly euthanized; children and adults with disabilities were sterilized, segregated, and isolated (Linett, 13). These practices arose as a result of the homogenization of time and timing: those who were unable to keep up were viewed as a drag on scientific, social, and evolutionary progress. Yet alongside what was arguably a hypervisibility of people with disabilities as constructed through eugenic discourse emerged a salient reevaluation of vision as the *sine qua non* of perception and knowledge. Technologies such as cinema, the telescope, and x-ray, as well as Freudian psychoanalysis, Einstein's theory of relativity, and Bergson's formulation of *la durée* contributed to distrust of ocularcentric epistemologies. *Bodies of Modernism* explores a cultural matrix in which physical capacities were interpreted in order to discredit a person's humanity and to foreground modernist experimentation and praxis. As Linett demonstrates, these cultural registers often operate simultaneously in modernist texts.

A valuation of perspective and subjectivity facilitated the inward turn of modernism and rendered obsolete the reflexive, universalizing pathos of Victorian depictions of disability. In their place, modernist texts staged individual responses to disabled characters who posit disability "not as a given, but as a question" that emerges through the ceaseless interplay of mind and body, as characters negotiate perception and awareness in order to interpret experiences and encounters (2). "[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 mind looks straight and clear . . . On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All night, all day, the body intervenes," writes Woolf in "On Being Ill" (Linett, 9). In characterizing her body as a disruption in the experience of her craft as a writer, Woolf situates herself not only with regard to health, but among women writers who struggled to reconcile aspirations to creativity with cultural expectations, particularly in an era when women's fertility was prized as the life source of human evolution. Depictions of other protagonists complicate this eugenic thread, suggesting that physical disability and sexuality were

214 incompatible. In fact, Linett's readings of Laura Wingfield in successive versions of *The Glass Menagerie*, of Hulga Hopewell in "Good Country People," and of Gerty in Joyce's "Nausicaa" reveal a consistent dynamic linking disability and sexuality. Although it functions variously, this dynamic serves to desexualize the women protagonists and to lend coherence to subtleties in characterization and narration.

Disabilities such as blindness and deafness contributed to a reconceptualization of the senses that was integral to modernist invention, as the absence of one sense invited reevaluation of the others. Linett brilliantly reveals the ambivalence inherent in Wells's "The Country of the Blind," juxtaposing Nunez's reasoned departure with stunning visual descriptions of the lush nocturnal landscape that cradles his solitude. Other readings, less ambivalent, suggest that blindness facilitated an exploration of consciousness and generated new modes of knowing oneself and others. In contrast, depictions of deafness by Welty, McCullers, and Bowen reflect the deep oralist bias that characterized this period, positing language as a defining feature of humanity and social commerce: its absence was understood to diminish one's worth and relationships.

As Tobin Siebers and other disability studies scholars have noted, the relationship of modernist praxis to deformity is complex. In defense of eugenic thinking, many characterized modern art as degenerate, going so far as to essentialize its alleged failings as the result of faulty vision on the part of the artist. Meanwhile, modernists challenged themselves to get beyond the surface to the truth of a thing, formulating subjectivity itself as a "deformative" influence in a world of superficial perceptions. Each relying on a ready set of metaphors rooted in physical disability, these competing discourses seem at turns to echo one another: the first seeks to eliminate while the second—however generative of new forms—seems to sublimate unwieldy encounters to the realm of art. Siebers and others have argued convincingly that modernist art makes possible encounters with disability in everyday life.² Nonetheless, these maneuvers to hold disability at a distance are why, for Linett, a poetics of disability must be understood as being deeply political.

With its "sheet of plain glass," Woolf's reflection invokes literary imaginaries that today remain largely normative with respect to disability. Despite an enduring preoccupation in the past several decades with the meanings of colonized, racialized, sexed, and class-bound bodies, cultural and literary studies—beyond disability studies—continue to naturalize disability and to accept diagnoses as uniformly uncomplicated by culture. With admirable conviction and grace, Linett formulates an invitation, asserting the political value of our individual and collective enterprise: "[If] we are still relying on norms of wholeness and completeness about bodies, our inclusive strategies (such as our work against sexism, homophobia, racism and fascism) and even our status as postmodern subjects who distrust universalizing narratives are all to some degree suspect. An analysis of disability, that is, is a necessary component of progressive scholarship" (18).

Inspired by Picasso's *Old Guitarist* (featured on the cover of Linett's book), Wallace Stevens crafts a series of poems about the transformative potential of subjective vision, wherein "they" encourage the guitarist to play "a tune beyond us, yet ourselves" (Linett, 204). Linett points out that their urging invites their transformation as subjects and shifts the register of artistic expression from sight to sound, thereby affording the potential to free oneself from the distance imposed by sight. Characterized as such, the guitarist's tune also seems an invitation to sidle up, to continue to consider the political implications of engagement with literary disability studies.

Notes

1. Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 118, emphasis in original.

2. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).