

WHO PUT THE *THE* IN *THE NOVEL*?

IDENTITY POLITICS AND DISABILITY IN NOVEL STUDIES

We are unknown, we knowers, ourselves to ourselves.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*

Who put the *bop* in the *bop shoo bop*?

Who put the *ram* in the *ram a lam a ding dong*?

Who was that man? I'd like to shake his hand.

—Bobby Vee

In the past few years, there has been much discussion, from a post-modern perspective, concerning the ontological status of the novel that challenges the very category of “the novel” as a discrete form or genre. For example, the editors of the collection *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, Deirdre Lynch and William Warner, ask whether we can talk about “the” novel without using conceptual quotation marks. “[W]e project a form of novel studies that would take as its object the semantic and social contests through which *the* novel keeps hold of its definite article and stakes a claim to cultural capital.”¹ Clifford Siskin prefers to replace “the novel” with the term “novelism,” which he defines as “the now

habitual subordination of writing to the novel" (qtd. in Lynch and Warner 1996:423). For these critics and others, the novel is not so much a knowable thing as it is a constructional process, a prejudice in writing that privileges certain power relations in the interests of cultural capital, national sovereignty, domestic domination, and racial, gendered, and class-based positionality.

At the end of the late twentieth century, one has little choice but to highlight the "the" in the novel. After all, this is the century that saw the removal of the "the" from such places as Ukraine, Congo, and Sudan (but not yet from the place where I write this essay—the Bronx) in a surge of identity politics characterized by postcolonial consciousness and a sense of the power of linguistic collusion in structures of power. The "the" in the Levant, the Sudatenland, as well as the Congo, seems to convey a notion of possession, a signification of country as a thing to be had. Like previously unquestioned categories of bourgeois thought, the novel is now seen as a term that claims a space, marks a domain, but is not and can never be a thing. Gone is the myth of *the* novel, a discrete form, a knowable practice, that arose at a specific time for a specific purpose. We run Ian Watt from pillar to postmodern. He made some really big mistakes—he thought there was "a" novel; he thought it had a beginning; he assumed it was a narrative fiction that displaced previous narrative fictions and had a "rise" located in metropole England.² In doing so, he was naive, sexist, racist, Anglophilic, logocentric, essentialist, positivist, vulgarly materialistic, and probably homophobic. But nobody is perfect.

Witness most of the critical works on the novel written since the 1980s, including work by Nancy Armstrong, John Bender, Michael McKeon, Catherine Gallagher, Janet Todd, Ian Watt, and others, including myself—all can be faulted along some, if not most, of these lines. At the end of the twentieth century, a new reckoning has begun to take place. This reckoning is being made by a conceptual tribunal of academic representatives of the disenfranchised and the marginalized—people of color, queers, indigenous and colonized peoples, feminists, to name a few, and the presiding judge has a mask whose features morph alternately

into those of Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Baudrillard, Butler, Said, and Lacan.³

When the novel takes its place in the docket, a central issue before the tribunal is whether those who wrote about it and claimed a European, or even a British, origin for it were in the right. This discussion depends, as does all cosmogony, on a rather simple idea: either the novel is a form with a beginning, or it is a form that has always been around. If the novel has always been around in the form of prose storytelling, then any attempt to see it as a "new" form is biased against indigenous peoples, against non-European cultures, and so on. If the novel does have a big-bang beginning, there arises the question of "when" and "where" it began. One could divide the critical world into "originists" and "antioriginists." If, as some have done, the origin of the novel is placed in eighteenth-century England, then criticism can be leveled that such a claim is motivated by an Anglocentric, colonialist, metropolitan bias. I would agree that highlighting something called "the novel," which in its name implies a new and dominant form, requires a certain act of national and cultural bravura. It is clear that when Clara Reeve in 1785 has one of her characters in *The Progress of Romance*, say "[T]he word *Novel* in all languages signifies something new,"⁴ she is striking a blow for early modernity and for England as well. Indeed, her title implies progress in narrative forms and in civilization. In this sense, Clara Reeve is an originist, although in a different sense than contemporary critics.

Many of the now critiqued "originists" who have written since the 1980s about the origin of the novel in the eighteenth century have been leftists and progressives of various stripes. The aim of placing the origin of the novel in eighteenth-century England and not at the dawn of human consciousness or in a country other than England was to claim that the novel was historically an early modern form dependent on early modern technologies which participated, both collusively and transgressively, in the transformation of the social, political, and cultural life produced by capitalism as an economic system and bourgeois liberalism as its concomitant political ideology. Since most can agree that industrial-

ization and capitalism began in England specifically and quickly spread through Europe, this originary discussion is driven by a historically necessary logic.

This approach varied from earlier materialist explanations of the novel by its use, in many cases, of the work of Michel Foucault. The theoretical sophistication of Foucault's analysis of discourse gave critics an instrument with which they might perform analyses that did not rely on a simple exegesis of themes relating to class and exploitation. But Foucault's work, while eminently suited for this kind of analysis, was not without its political pitfalls. As Wendy Brown has recently summarized the critique of Foucault:

In his concern with disciplinary power, in his articulation of how certain discourses are forged into regimes of truth, and in his formulation of power as that which produces subjects rather than simply suppressing or positioning them, Foucault conjures a political field with relatively little open space and none of the tricks of self-overcoming, of forward motion, contained in Marxist historiography.⁵

In a sense, the revision of an older materialist vision of history and subjectivity was certainly long overdue. But, like any historically determined practice, Foucault's work was also grounded in its time. In the sixties and seventies, radical movements found themselves virtually without a political model for social change. In the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Foucault offered a largely intellectual model instead. For Foucault, power in its micro-dissemination is to be found, like background noise in the cosmos, equally distributed through all societies, not simply in capitalist formations. Power may ultimately trace its origins back to some head of government or sovereign entity, but it has a life of its own. It operates discursively, which means that it can only be opposed discursively.

Furthermore, with Foucault's refutation of the "repression theory," an identifiable political force oppressing citizens cannot be located and

therefore opposed. Political compliance is achieved without repression through the willing cooperation of a populace. Thus, Foucault's thought, while suiting a Marxist or leftist critique, undermines, or revises, some very fundamental political notions. Agency becomes problematic, and political change becomes confusing since, like Oakland to Gertrude Stein, there is no "there" there; identity becomes fraught, since to "be" someone involves being a subject whose existence depends on engaging in the common discourse. All this leads to a critique of the novel that can be carried out in the university without an allied political struggle, without models of what a society or cultural production would look like in a progressive setting, and without the need for any articulation other than an individual one written at night in the glow of the computer screen.

Along with this formation in leftist thought came the beginning of identity politics in the form of the feminist and civil rights movements. Because this history is well known, I do not need to trace these developments and their subsequent proliferation through a variety of further identities—national, ethnic, somatic, sexual, and so on. But what is clear is that our current critical sensorium must necessarily include the sense of identity, and many articles on the novel see identity as a key for understanding this literary form or nonform. Linked with and overlaying this notion of the primacy of identity is a postmodern paradigm or antiparadigm that questions the nature of meaning and categories. This interrogation exists in a difficult and tense relation to the idea of identity. However, one relatively untroubled way that postmodern thought has entered into the identity debate, primarily through the work of Lacan and Derrida, has been in problematizing essentialism. By raising doubts about the ontology of meaning, the view that things unproblematically signify, that objects are, that genders exist, postmodern theorists have helped create the notion that identity is not a given but a construction. However, the very permission given to think of identity as a complex construction also serves to undermine the notion of identity, as theorists like Judith Butler have pointed out by asking, "[w]hat can be meant by 'identity,' then, and what grounds the presumption that identities are

often they are seen as villains, bitter and warped, or as innocent victims, good and kindly, although desexualized and devitalized.¹⁰ They range from Quilp to Tiny Tim, from Ahab to Esther Summerson, from Quasimodo to Clifford Chatterly.

But disability is somewhat different from other identities and subjects them to a kind of scrutiny. Disability is an identity divorced from family, nation, ethnicity, or gender. It is not a discrete but rather a porous category. Anyone can become disabled, and it is also possible for a person with disabilities to be “cured” and thus become “normal.” Furthermore, race, nationality, and ethnicity have in effect been considered biological disabilities in an eugenic culture. Because the category of disability is porous, its contingent nature is all the more challenging to identities that seem fixed. In some sense, disability is more like class, which is constructed but is not biologically determined. We might say that disability is a postmodern identity because, although one can somatize disability, it is impossible to essentialize it the way one can the categories of gender or ethnicity. That is, although disability is “of” the body, it is much more “of” the environment which can create barriers to access and communication.¹¹ Also, since the category of disability casts quite a wide net according to definitions provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990—including in the same grouping obesity, carpal tunnel syndrome, AIDS, deafness, dyslexia, attention-deficit disorder, Down syndrome, and many other diverse conditions—it is hard to imagine any one person as a “representative” for this group or as a “representative” character in a novel. And this very fact engenders a deconstructive potential that undermines any individual’s claim to represent the totality of an identity.¹²

More tellingly and to my point, the identity community, if one can call it that, has been very slow to recognize disability as a legitimate member. Perhaps because of the ambiguities I just related, disability is seen as in some sense “spoiling” the neatness of the categories of oppression, victim, and victimizer. Anyone working in the field of disability studies will know that disability, despite the legislative accomplishments achieved in its name, is generally seen as having a less legitimate minority status than

other more high-profile identities.¹³ Indeed, in multicultural curriculum discussions, disability is often struck off the list of required alterities because it is seen as degrading or watering down the integrity of identities. While most faculty would vote for a requirement that African American or Latino or Asian American novels should be read in the university, few would mandate the reading of novels about people with disabilities. A cursory glance at books on diversity and identity shows an almost total absence of disability issues. The extent to which people with disabilities are excluded from the progressive academic agenda is sobering, and the use of ableist language on the part of critics and scholars who routinely turn a “deaf ear” or find a point “lame” or a political act “crippling” is shocking to anyone who is even vaguely aware of the way language is implicated in discrimination and exclusion.

These acts of omission and commission are all the more scandalous since people with disabilities make up 12 to 15 percent of the population—a greater proportion than that of any other minority. This statistic can be increased for people in poorer countries. Likewise, about 15 percent of the population has hearing loss and another 15 percent has impaired vision. With an aging baby boomer population, the number of people with disabilities will only increase. In the Third World, poor nutrition, land mines, war, and disease increase the numbers of people with disabilities. And let us not forget children, particularly those of the Third World, who are the primary victims of discrimination, with 90 percent dying before they reach twenty, and 90 percent of children with mental disabilities dying before they reach five. In the United States, 66 percent of people with disabilities are unemployed, while half the people with disabilities live on or near the poverty line. A recent Modern Language of America survey showed that there were twice as many members with disabilities as there were African American members. Yet, by and large, there is scant attention paid to disability in the identity politics market, particularly in regard to novel studies. Certainly, disability studies is beginning to reverse this trend. Its status, at this point, resembles that of African American studies in the early 1960s.

The lack of attention paid to disability by those in the forefront of identity and multicultural studies shows dramatically that the Occam's razor employed to evaluate critical works—does it focus on race, gender, or sexual orientation?—is a dull razor indeed. Rather, one can say that identity politics as a method of literary analysis will necessarily reflect the biases of its own time. While our consciousness of some selected and canonized identities has certainly been raised, the biases of those within the confines of the canon remain confirmed by their invisibility. Identity studies is no more value-free and objective than hermeneutics, structuralism, or any other applied discourse. Perhaps critics of the future will be astounded, puzzled, and disturbed that works by scholars like Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Henry Louis Gates, bell hooks, and others managed to steer so completely away from any discussion of disability.

I should make clear that my solution to the problem of identity is not the inclusion of disability on the roster of favored identities. Rather, the point is that identity studies itself is limited by the necessarily taxonomic peculiarity of its endeavor. The list of identities will only grow larger, tied to an ever-expanding idea of inclusiveness. After all, when all identities are finally included, there will be no identity. When studies focus on alterity, and when alterity must be included, then, in the full plenum of inclusion, alterity ceases to be Other. Identity becomes so broad a category that it cannot contain identity. In other words, identity politics has reached a paradoxical resolution to a problem that started as a logical extension of a discussion about rights. It is Wendy Brown's point, citing Foucault, that "the universal juridical ideal of liberalism" combined with "the normalizing principle of disciplinary regimes conjoined and taken up within the discourse of politicized identity" yields a new kind of subject, "reiterative of regulatory, disciplinary society . . . which 'ceaselessly characterizes, classifies, and specializes,' which works through 'surveillance, continuous registration, perpetual assessment, and classification,' through a social machinery 'that is both immense and minute.'"¹⁴ In other words, the classificatory and judgmental system inherent in an identity critique of novels will necessarily end up surveying texts through

an ever-expanding and therefore increasingly imprecise grid. This framework will therefore yield less and less information about more and more works and become a system that explains everything, thus ultimately explaining nothing.

I want to complicate this already complicated critique further by pointing to the inability of identity politics to include disability under its tent in some way other than with second-class status. My point is to question how effective an antidiscriminatory stance, based on identity politics, can be when the watchman always needs to be watched. No coalition of identity-based activists or scholars will ever be able to avoid marginalizing and minoritizing *some* group. Bosnian mothers, Albanian Serbs, or Ethiopian Jews will always be out of favor, and if not them, then tribal peoples of northern India or indigenous rebels in Sri Lanka. An inherent limitation of permitted or favored identities is built into the definition of the project. The contradiction becomes more acute when we realize that much of identity politics is a reaction to a rights-based model rather than to an economically egalitarian, political one.

From this perspective, we can see that the necessity for identity is actually a compromise formation in theory, tailored to a largely middle-class, First World audience seeking reassurance about the parameters of liberal thought and politics. The interest in identity in novel criticism is a ratification of this reassurance. If one can say, for example, that women are depicted in a binary way in novels as either madwomen or angels, the alternative to either of these roles is held out as a norm. What is that alternative but some superscription of the ideal of white, middle-class men with full rights? Likewise, the benchmark for people of color is the depiction of the middle-class or gentry as full-fledged members of society. As Brown writes, "without recourse to the white masculine middle class ideal, politicized identities would forfeit a good deal of their claims to injury and exclusion, their claims to the political significance of their difference."¹⁵

What relevance could this discussion have to the novel and novel studies? First, I think the current caution against thinking of "the" novel

is an effect of a more general tendency to think of identity as multiple on the one hand and resistant on the other. The novel must be an effect of power in the same sense that identity is both the result of power and a resistance to it. As in the case of human identities, the identity of the novel is postulated as covering many instantiations of narrative. But, unlike materialist explanations, identity critique tends toward ahistoricism by postulating a timeless category of identity, transferred from the present to the past, and then defining origins by postulating that identity is anterior to the origin. So the origin of the novel, for example, is clearly preceded by the category of “feminine” or “colonial.” This circularity of thinking defines the moment of origin as causally related to the category of identity so chosen. The flaw in this argument is that if an originary moment is sufficiently originary, it will participate in a redefinition of the identity that is supposed to have created it. In a cosmological sense, the world can’t be created without the creation of the creator.

In this sense, I hope that by questioning the foundation of identity politics, I can raise the case for a reading of the origin of the novel that is not totally dependent on what must be considered a bias of contemporary criticism—the demand that all explanations must satisfy an insistence on tracing a nondominant, non-Western, non-European, non-British origin of the novel. So, I now wish to perform a paradoxical proof of the points I have been making by attempting to develop a theory of the origin of the novel that is solely based on the concept of disability. In other words, I want to prove that I can justify a disability-centered identity politics the way that others have done, for example, in establishing feminist, ethnic, or class-based models. In doing so, my aim is twofold: I want to show that disability is a viable identity, and, paradoxically, I want to demonstrate the limitations of an identity-based explanation for the origin of the novel. In other words, I want to show that disability can and should sit on the tribunal of identity politics, but I also want to show that including disability will not solve the problems inherent in the tribunal in the first place.

What are the possibilities for a disability-centered discussion of the novel? Initially, one would want to rethink the nature of the novel. An early definition of the novel, by Clara Reeve in 1785, states,

the Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. The novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real.¹⁶

Some fifty years later, John Dunlop defined novels as “agreeable and fictitious productions, whose province it is to bring about natural events by natural means, and which preserve curiosity alive without the help of wonder—in which human life is exhibited in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world.”¹⁷

According to these relatively contemporary accounts, a new literary form with links to previous fictions like the romance, tales, the epic, and so on, had appeared on the scene in England and France. And what characterizes this form is some notion that it treats “real” life in a “familiar” way that appears to be “true” without the intrusion of the elements that do not appear “natural.” This technique, most familiarly called “realism,” is so much a part of our critical vocabulary that perhaps we have reified it somewhat. What is realism, in fact? If novelists tried to create a real effect, does that mean that earlier writers did not attempt to portray the real? The implication is that earlier writers of the romance and epic wrote imaginary tales or at least tales involving the supernatural, the realm of gods, witches, monsters, classical heroes and heroines, and so on. But is realism any more “real” than other types of narrative? Is a representation of the real any more real than “the real”? And is the concept of what is real absolute? Why should realism have arisen in this particular period? Did novelists and readers just decide to get real?

Ian Watt, as one of the early exponents of the origin-of-the-novel paradigm, explains rather glibly that “[m]odern realism, of course, begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his [*sic*] senses: it has its origins in Descartes and Locke.”¹⁸ Watt further explains realism as part of the middle-class’s interest in the individual and his or her perceptions of reality. His notion of “formal realism” is defined as such “because the term realism does not here refer to any special literary doctrine or purpose, but only to a set of narrative procedures which are commonly found together in the novel.”¹⁹ This definition owes much to the period in which Watt’s book was written, and his debt to formalism and New Criticism are obvious. So for Watt realism is not about the subject matter of the novel, but more about the way the story is told and the consciousness that apprehends the story. But why does interest in the individual have to take the form of realism? Why could not the same interest take the form of rampant egocentric fantasy or one-sided, biased memoir (which seems to be the form realism takes in our own time)? Indeed, individual perception should lead more to individualist, sensory-based texts, more like twentieth-century literature, and not necessarily toward narratives about groups, social classes, and communities.

Instead of looking toward this explanation of realism, why not look elsewhere? The growing body of literature on disability indicates to us that part of the formation of the modern subject was tied up with the creation of the disabled object. Characteristic of the split between the “normal” and the “abnormal” which arose during the formative period of the novel (as we know it) is a distinction between normal bodies and abnormal bodies, between normal minds and abnormal minds, between normal environments and abnormal environments, and so on. The normal-abnormal dichotomy displaced an earlier paradigm based on a notion of the ideal.

This notion of the ideal seems to have been the general rule in Western society and was linked ideologically to structures of kingship and feudal society. In this paradigm, an ideal person or institution (ruler, form,

palace, god) occupied the pinnacle of a social-cultural triangle, and all other instantiations were by definition below the ideal. The transition to ideological forms of government that would legitimate the change from feudalism and mercantilism to capitalism required new forms of subjectivity and symbolic production. Since the fundamental paradox of bourgeois society as it evolved was between the concentration of power and money in the hands of a relatively few and the ideological claim that all men [*sic*] were created equal, forms of symbolic production that glorified the ideal and placed all citizens below that ideal person were no longer appropriate.

Yet, at the same time, a citizenry that was truly equal in the economic sense, as depicted in literature, was also prohibited. In order to bridge the gap between the obvious social and economic inequality in bourgeois democracies and the notion that all citizens are equal, there emerged that most perfect of subjects—the average citizen, “*l’homme moyen*,” described by Adolphe Quetelet at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Quetelet took physical bodily measurements in order to determine the proportions of the average man. Of this man Quetelet wrote, “If one seeks to establish, in some way, the basis of a social physics, it is he whom one should consider.”²⁰

The necessity for the average citizen in social thought was paralleled by the need for the average citizen in ideology. How do we think of this average citizen? Symbolically. Thus symbolic production on the ideological level aimed at the creation of average, that is, nonheroic, middle-class, “real” citizens. In this sense, real means average. It is no coincidence that for the next hundred years or more, bourgeois society spent much of its culturally productive time trying to find out exactly what average meant. This was done largely with the aid of the new science of statistics, initiated by Quetelet and others, in conjunction with the new science of eugenics.²¹ The word and concept of “normal” entered the English and French languages at this time. Novels were novel precisely because they were a form engaged in depicting this average or normal life, as Reeve and Dunlop noted in their own time. Indeed, the project

of creating “realistic” heroes and heroines was the aim of novel writing from the mid-eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth centuries.

The word repeatedly and regularly used in conjunction with character in eighteenth-century discussions of the novel was “virtue.” Novels were judged to be good depending on the extent to which the story inspired virtue and the protagonists were virtuous. Virtue implied that there was a specific and knowable moral path and stance that a character could and should take. In other words, a normative set of behaviors were demanded of characters in novels. Characters had to be “exemplary.”²² We can see in works like *The Progress of Romance* that novels were judged mainly on two criteria—their realism or probability and their attitude toward virtue, which “should always be represented in the most beautiful and amiable light.”²³ Both these criteria, as we can see, are really measures of normativity. If readers disagreed about the worth of a novel during this period, the argument revolved around whether an author had depicted “human nature as *it is*, rather than as *it ought to be*.”²⁴ or around whether the events of the story were “probable” or “improbable.”²⁵ Thus, the question for the eighteenth century centered on the extent to which the novelist conformed to a cultural norm, not, as Watt suggests, the formal aspects of the writing or the perception of the truth of an individual.²⁶ In fact, it is virtually impossible to find a discussion about the “formal” aspects of novel writing in this period.

Furthermore, the main characters of novels, in their virtuous incarnations, were national types. The requirement that they be “realistic” and “virtuous” was in effect a requirement that they be typical. There are few novels from 1720 to 1870 whose main characters, the ones with whom we identify and sympathize, are not national stereotypes. And, as such, these characters also have bodies and minds that signify this averageness. The protagonists of British novels are British, look typical, and embody the virtues that England values.²⁷ Love stories may offer a cross-national or class liaison but usually end up ratifying the norm.

This project of cultural typicality has to be seen for what it is—the incipient impulse of a tendency that would later be called eugenics. It is in-

structive that one of the founders of eugenics was Sir Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, who embarked on a project similar to that of the novel when he began photographing different racial and ethnic peoples in order to create composite photographs of the physiognomies of each type. So, for example, he photographed Jewish citizens of England and overlaid their photographic images to create the composite (or in some sense) typical Jew. He also photographed mental and tubercular patients to see if he could arrive at the physiognomies of the diseased.²⁸ This attempt to create typical images of racial and disabled Others in photography must be seen as linked to the attempt to do likewise in novels. The investigations of race and nationality in nineteenth-century novels demonstrate this linked interest.

There is virtually no major protagonist in a novel written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who is in some way physically marked with a disability.²⁹ Indeed, realism, with its emphasis on probability, is bound to present normative characters and situations. Think of the physical typicality of Robinson Crusoe, Tom Jones, Joseph Andrews, Clarissa Harlowe, Becky Sharp, Emma Woodhouse, David Copperfield, Julian Sorel, and the hundreds of other physically able and typical protagonists from novelistic central casting. This is so much the case that E. M. Forster, in the course of *Aspects of the Novel*, sees the inclusion in a novel of a character with disability as unrealistic. He says that readers will protest deviations from a norm: “‘One knows a book isn’t real,’ they say, ‘still one does expect it to be natural, and this angel or midget or ghost—no, it is too much.’”³⁰ The midget is “too much” because midgets do not walk into one’s bourgeois house any more than do Africans or angels.³¹

So, on some profound level, the novel emerges as an ideological form of symbolic production whose central binary is normal-abnormal. This dialectic works in a fundamental way to produce plots. Often a “normal” character is made “abnormal” by circumstance. The most familiar of these has to do with that character’s loss of social class, social milieu, family lineage, or money. So the very normal Robinson Crusoe is made

abnormal by unusual circumstance. The very normal Tom Jones is made abnormal by a ruse that deprives him of his noble birth. The very normal Pamela or Clarissa are made abnormal by abduction and the threat of, or the act of, rape. Ironically, these rather unusual abnormalities in the life of a character are seen as "probable," given the novel's own rules of realism, when, in fact, it is rather unlikely that a bourgeois person will lose all his or her money, social status, or personal freedom. Indeed, social class is defined by its persistence and interlocking guarantees.

Another variation on this theme is that the protagonist is made "abnormal" by a certain trait or habit that, while not a disability, acts as a disability in contrast to the expectations of readers concerning the conventions of character in the novel. So Jane Eyre is plain, which is quite normal, but it is rendered abnormal by the convention of novels, which insists that heroes and heroines be physically attractive, presumably since the national type is projected to be well-proportioned in face and limb. Or someone like Evelina is made abnormal by her lack of proper parenting, which renders her socially maladroit.

In the realm of social class, the norm is typically not the mean but the ideological fantasy of the mean. This fantasy is an ideological necessity if bourgeois capitalism is to project a positive vision of its operative world as free, prosperous, and coherent. Not so strangely, the "average" novel hero of the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries more often than not moves through the world not of the bourgeoisie, but of the upper gentry and lower nobility. This netherworld of upper gentry and lower nobility elevates the tone and vision of bourgeois existence much in the way that contemporary television shows that present upper-middle-class interiors as the norm do, even while the majority of viewers are from a much less privileged class.³² To be deprived of this fantasy norm is considered a disabling event for someone like Oliver Twist, Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, or Gwendolyn Harleth. Even for someone like Jude Fawley, the realistic norm of the rural peasantry is a disabling situation, although, unlike many of the earlier heroes, he will never achieve the desired state of comfort.

So, to consolidate the national norm, the major characters in novels must somehow confront the disabling of their character. For the norm to be established, the abnormal must also appear. The abnormal appears in all kinds of ways in the realms of the social and financial, as I have indicated, as the unvirtuous, the mentally ill, the racial Other, as well as simply in the appearance of characters with physical disabilities. In the eighteenth century, for the most part, normal characters with virtues are set off by abnormal characters with vices. Most often, the vice is sexual license in the behavior of a debauched, upper-class libertine or seductress, or, in rarer cases, greedy and unprincipled parvenus. A simple Manichean battle ensues, and ultimately either the virtuous character triumphs or, in some cases, dies.

Later, as a culture of the norm becomes fully operative in the nineteenth century, the immoral or negative is often depicted as having a physical disability. Here begins the novel with a recognizable villain who is often one-eyed, one-legged, walks with difficulty, stutters, manifests compulsive tics, and so on. The flip side of this character is the utterly innocent character with a disability, most often a child, a childlike person, a woman, or an aged character. Interestingly, this dichotomy can work in many other multicultural analyses, since race, gender, and class were also integrally part of the eugenic analysis. In other words, moral characteristics become increasingly somatized, particularly as eugenics begins to codify physical, mental, and ethnic traits. Under this imperative, Zola and the Neo-Realists are able to formulate a theory of the novel in which inheritable family traits determine character and behavior, thus institutionalizing the "scientific" work of eugenics in the very fabric of novel making.

Plot in the novel, then, is really a device to turn what is perceived as the average, ordinary milieu into an abnormal one. Plot functions in the novel, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by temporarily deforming or disabling the fantasy of nation, social class, and gender behaviors that are constructed as norms. The *telos* of the plot aims to return the protagonists to this norm by the end of the novel.³³ The end

of the novel represents a cure, a repair of the disability, a nostalgic return to a normal time. René Girard points to Stepan Trofimovitch's quotation of the New Testament at the end of Dostoevski's *The Possessed*, "But the sick man will be healed and 'will sit at the feet of Jesus,' and all will look upon him with astonishment." Girard says Stepan "is this sick man who is healed in death and whom death heals."³⁴ This notion of cure as closure is the rule in novels in which the end represents the plot as strategic abnormality overcome, or, as Girard puts it, "an obsession that has been transcended."³⁵

In this sense, the identity of the novel, if we can see the novel as having an identity, revolves around a simple plot. A normal situation becomes abnormal and, by the end of the novel, normality or some variant on it is restored. We can put this simplistic paradigm into the language that Wendy Brown uses, and say that the identity of the novel is therefore a "wounded identity." Like Philoctetes, the novel must have a wound. And like that of Philoctetes, this wound is necessary, since without it the novel would not be able to perform its function. Yet, also like that of the mythical character, the wound must be healed or cured.

I return to the notion of identity because I want to tie the novel, disability, and identity politics together around the issue of cure. The novel as a form relies on cure as a narrative technique. Protagonists must "change," we are told, for their characters to be believable. Interestingly, this aspect of believability flies in the face of probability, since most "real" people do not change easily, if at all. When characters change, they undergo a kind of moral or perceptual transformation that cures them. So Emma is cured of her self-centeredness and D'Arcy is cured of his pride. Likewise, the plot is cured of its abnormal initiating events. The narrative, at its end, is no longer disabled by its lack of conformity to imagined social norms. The process of narrative, then, serves to wound identity—whether individual, bourgeois, national, gendered, racialized, or cultural. Readers read so that they can experience this wound vicariously, so they can imagine the dissolution of the norms under which they are expected to labor. As a temporarily wounded person, the reader can see the way

that society disavows various categories of being and at the same time can rejoice in the inevitable return to the comfort of bourgeois norms, despite the onus that these norms place on its beneficiaries as well as on those excluded from the benefits of bourgeois identity.³⁶

But the desire for a cure is also the desire for a quick fix. The alterity presented by disability is shocking to the liberal, ableist sensibility, and so narratives involving disability always yearn for the cure, the neutralizing of the disability. This desire to neutralize is ironic, since in a dialectic sense the fantasy of normality needs the abjection of disability to maintain a homeostatic system of binaries. But, since this desire is premised on the denigration of disability, it will of course be invisible to the normate³⁷ readers who prefer the kindly notion of cure to the more dramatic notion of eradication. Likewise, the quick fix presented by issues concerning race, class, and gender are equally characteristic of the bourgeois imagination. Class conflict can be nicely reconciled by novels like *North and South*, where a kind of utopian factory emerges that bypasses unions and is achieved by rerouting surplus value through the benevolence of a female captain of industry in the form of Margaret Hale, or *Hard Times*, where the working-class struggle is seen as a "muddle" only soluble by Christian charity toward the poor who "will always be with you."

All these cures are placebos for the basic problem presented to capitalism and its ideological productions in the form of modern subjectivity, which dons the form of the normal, average, citizen protagonist—that bellcurve-generated, fantastic being who reconciles the promise of equal rights with the reality of an unequal distribution of wealth. But the quick fix, the cure, has to be repeated endlessly, like a patent medicine, because it actually cures nothing. Novels have to tell this story over and over again, as do films and television, since the patient never stays cured and the disabled, cured individually, refuse to stop reappearing as a group. Indeed, modern subjectivity is a wounded identity that cannot cure itself without recourse to cure narratives, which means that it cannot cure itself at all, since the disability of modern subjectivity is inherent in the environment, not in the subject.

The problem with the notion of wounded identities, as Brown postulates, is that the ontology of their coming into being is best characterized by Nietzsche's notion of *ressentiment*, an "effect of domination that reiterates impotence, a substitute for action, for power, for self-affirmation that reinscribes incapacity, powerlessness, and rejection."³⁸ Thus, identity is dependent for its motivation and existence on remembering and reinvoking the pain caused by oppression. Politicized identity "installs its pain in the very foundation of its political claim, in its demand for recognition as identity by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics."³⁹ Like the novel, identity is rooted in its wounds, and plot is a form of pain control. Thus, its solution must be to heal the wound, end the pain. However, just as the cure offered in novels spells closure for the text, the cure offered to wounded identity spells the end of identity, since identity is created by the initializing wound. The answer to novels is only more novels, not a cure offered for the actual ills of society. Likewise, the proliferation of politicized identities is symptomatic of the problem, and the inclusion of more identities in our norm will no more solve the problem of oppression than the proliferation of novels will.

I have tried to make the case that disability, as an identity, can legitimately be seen as the foundational model that situates the origin of the novel in eighteenth-century England and France. If disability is such an origin, I can argue that all other identities—class, race, gender, sexual preference—should be subsumed under the hegemonic identity category of disability. In other words, I contend that the "the" in the novel belongs to a history of ableist domination. If I do that, I place myself in the line of critics who have argued for the centrality of their identities as foundational for the creation of modern subjectivity. By doing so, I can now make two observations. First, I clearly have not solved the problem of identity politics. By adding my identity to the roster, and even by claiming foundational status for my identity (which can be seen as including and therefore superseding other identities), I have rearranged the chessboard without creating a strategy for winning the battle. Second, my

writing of this piece, its subsequent publication in 1998 in *Novel*, and even a chorus of supporting voices from other scholars involved in disability studies who may read this work, will not propel disability into the forefront of identity politics for the simple reason that the other identity groups will not cede their place of priority. The reason for this reluctance is also relatively simple—to truly acknowledge the existence of another identity dilutes the general category of identity, and to prioritize identities places some identities further down the line of significance. Disability will have difficulty being seen as having a primary place in identity politics because most academics are deeply implicated in ableism without, of course, realizing it. Disability is still routinely ignored, marginalized, or patronized by the very people most active in identity politics.

As for *the* novel, the attempt to deabsolutize the form will in fact yield far less than the attempt to keep the form unitary. Pluralities of narrative-things-in-prose, rather than epics, romances, novels, and short stories, may provide a deconstructive breathing space apart from the rigidities of genre, but it also risks a certain hyperventilation of categories that prevent political analysis altogether. If we simply say that humans have told stories throughout the ages, we run the danger of making an observation no more trenchant than the kind of opening paragraph first-year students write in English 1 classes. If we follow this "throughout the ages" mode, we risk abolishing history in the endeavor to pluralize.

No one is suggesting a glib, monolithic view of the novel's history, and it is better for us to argue over terms, moments, directions, and implications than it is to be content with quick and dirty hegemonic meta-narratives. But, without an acknowledgment that narrative forms arise from historical moments, speak to those moments, enforce powerful interests while also resisting them, we come up with a fairy tale about empowerment, multiple voices, liberatory discourse, and so on that belies the difficult work of cultural-political practice. And we all know that fairy tales "which treat of fabulous persons and things," as Clara Reeve wrote, are the things of romance, while the novel "is a picture of real life and manners."⁴⁰