

Apr 1st, 4:00 PM - 4:30 PM

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Dobson, Emily, "Missing the Mark: Exploring the Forgetting of Disability in Media" (2017). *Critical Reflections*. 6.  
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**Missing the Mark:  
Exploring the Forgetting of Disability in Media**

Emily Dobson, University of Windsor

A common concern within the disability community are the ways in which negative or misguided representations in media produce stigma. Stigma can be broadly defined to include “problems of knowledge (ignorance), problems of attitudes (prejudice), and problems of behaviour (discrimination),” which means that inadequate or unrealistic representations can cause a variety of damaging effects<sup>1</sup>. In *Narrative Prosthesis*, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder explore the many ways in which a broad selection of literature has represented disability as a literary device, rather than an identity. They state that in the process “disabled people's marginalization has occurred in the midst of a perpetual circulation of their images.”<sup>2</sup> Despite an ever growing number of examples of disability in media, the public, and especially many scholars, have forgotten about how many representations actually exist: “a social erasure has been performed even as a representational repertoire has evolved”<sup>3</sup>. This forgetting has serious consequences, not only on the way disability is socially received, but in framing accessibility problems as either non-existent or not as something in need of significant change

In this way, a critical look at representations of disability is needed in order to not only combat stigma, but to bring disability issues to the forefront of social and political consideration. Using Letitia Meynell's model of pictures as epistemic devices and Nancy Tuana's exploration of Wilful Ignorance in the women's health movement, I will argue that the social forgetting that occurs in spite of the numerous examples in media is due to the outcomes of those representations. In addition, I will suggest that discussion of Wilful Ignorance should take

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<sup>1</sup> Thornicroft, Rose, Kassam, Sartorius p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell and Snyder p. 6

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

disability examples into account going forward within the field of Agnotology. When the purpose of a disabled character as a literary device is ultimately to remove or cure the disability itself, it is not surprising that the public ultimately forgets that there was a disabled person there at all.

### **Implications of Absence: Meynell's Pictures as Epistemic Devices**

In her work "Pictures, Pluralism, and Feminist Epistemology: Lessons from "Coming to Understand", Letitia Meynell strengthens Nancy Tuana's argument in "Coming to Understand" by outlining a model by which we can perceive and criticize pictorial representations. Meynell's main criticism of Tuana's account of the history of excluding or trivializing the female clitoris in anatomical illustrations is that Tuana's analysis "lacks grounds for understanding why she should be persuaded by these pictures" and suggests "that pictures can be powerful epistemic devices for mediating the interplay between epistemic object and subject and for negotiating the role of the community in the production and retention of knowledge"<sup>4</sup>.

Mediums for any given form of media or type of communication comes with specific trends and constraints, which influence the final outcome of the media. In anatomical illustrations, different viewpoints or perspectives, being, for example, internal versus external components of the genitalia, will dictate which aspects of the genitalia get depicted or excluded. While it is potentially acceptable for certain aspects or components to be removed because of "the limitations of the medium, technique, and view"<sup>5</sup>. She maintains that when something is deemed to be significant for inclusion, "the conventions governing the views and drawing systems of medical illustration are sufficiently flexible" in order to allow for their inclusion, or a

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<sup>4</sup> Meynell p. 2

<sup>5</sup> Meynell p. 11

different drawing system is chosen instead<sup>6</sup>. We can also critically examine how the interests of the audience, illustrator, and client compound to influence the overall outcome. Medical illustration in particular, according to Meynell, is dictated by three main areas

“where patriarchal conceptions may enter...(1) The peculiarly conceptual nature of medical illustration, which allows the preference of conceptual clarity over completeness and accuracy...(2) The economic nature of medical illustration...(3) The dependence on the illustrations of previous generations”<sup>7</sup>.

Illustrators must work within the confines of their mediums and the constraints of their craft, which includes what the client’s interests are as well as the conventions of those who have come before them within the craft and have taught them the trade.

Just as pictorial representations have particular constraints, viewers themselves fill in gaps and bring their own conceptions and interpretations. Meynell explains that when we as viewers “look at a visual representation we generate what we might think of as a set of fictional truths about the fictional state of affairs represented...when these pictures are realistic depictions, we imagine of ourselves that we are seeing them”<sup>8</sup>. Viewers are aware that what they are seeing is not the actual thing, but they are inclined to engage in a pretend play where they take on the position needed to relate with what the image is attempting to convey. Even this is partially constrained by ““principles of generations,” that dictate what we should imagine...determining how one should engage with representations in different genres and in different media”<sup>9</sup>. These principles of generations, brought to the representation both by the illustrator, by using specific techniques and approaches, and the viewer, who may or may not understand the medium’s constraints and how to interpret the piece (but will inevitably bring his or her own

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Meynell p. 13

<sup>8</sup> Meynell p. 15

<sup>9</sup> Meynell p. 16

interpretations), “inform how the viewer inspects the object [being represented], thus informing how she inspects the depiction”<sup>10</sup>. This complicates our analysis because the viewer can either be “unable to apply the right principles” or the “knowers’ different interests may prompt them to focus on or order the fictional truths differently”<sup>11</sup>. However, this allows for interpretational flexibility, given that the viewer can also adopt different positions when viewing the pictorial representation even when there is a kind of prescribed interpretation to it.

The flexibility in understanding and in ways of constructing pictorial representations means that when something is left out of the image, it is not necessarily because of an intent to misrepresent the particular aspect or component of the genitalia or body segment, in the case of anatomical illustrations, but an assumption of its lack of importance or significance<sup>12</sup>. Since in the case of medical illustration, what is represented or conveyed, according to Meynell, is a causal relation, “the function of separate parts in relation to the function of an entire system”<sup>13</sup>. The image prompts viewers, who are already pretending to be seeing the real thing, to see the aspects represented explicitly as part of a system of relations, and so when an aspect of it is removed or trivialized in the image, it is assumed to be insignificant or unimportant to the functional or causal system being displayed. Meynell states this is because the missing aspect or “object can have no causal role in a system for spatial and causal relations,” and through this “patriarchal norms...can dictate what is deemed important in the conceptual visual hierarchy”<sup>14</sup>. Hence the clitoris is excluded because it is seen as unimportant to the reproductive system, and the female sexual function system is ignored altogether.

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<sup>10</sup> Meynell p. 17

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Meynell p. 20

<sup>13</sup> Meynell p. 21

<sup>14</sup> Meynell p. 22

In contrast, feminist approaches to medical illustrations indicate “that sexual anatomy is connected to reproductive anatomy intimately, but is far from reducible to it”<sup>15</sup>. Feminist illustrations also allow for genitalia to be depicted on a spectrum, which accounts for and normalizes intersexuality, since the dichotomy expressed in medical textbooks of purely standard-male and standard-female genitalia makes intersexuality “unimaginable and this reinforces its cultural unintelligibility”<sup>16</sup>. The variation in depiction, which, due to the versatility of pictorial representation, allows for approachability for a wide audience, and thus leads to a cultural intelligibility and understanding.

Meynell’s account of the problems with exclusion of important aspects of causal systems or functions provides important insight into problems with representation of disability in pictorial and text media alike. In these representations, two types of absences or erasure contribute to a form of ignorance or forgetting about the representations occurring at all. First, especially in visual mediums such as film and video games, the process of accommodating limitation and social barriers often lacks crucial mediatory points in depiction. This can lead to an overall removal of the social and political dimensions of disability, which in turn leads to resistances against disability movements towards social and political action. Second, most narratives in a large variety of media, resolve with the disabled character being removed, typically through death, or cured; the disability is rarely allowed to exist within the narrative after its resolution, and through this process of erasure, what becomes normalized and ingrained is the absence of disability itself. The first can be explored most directly with Meynell’s epistemic approach to pictorial representations, but the second can also benefit from her analysis.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Meynell p. 23

In the first case, the real limitations and the process of navigating a society that erects unnecessary barriers, or the very tangible consequences of ignoring those limitations, are left out of the use of disability in media. This occurs primarily because disability, instead of being explored as part of a character's identity, is used as a plot device, and the mitigation is not necessary to said plot, but more importantly because it isolates disability by removing it from social and political contexts. Mitchell and Snyder state that "physical and cognitive differences have been narrated as alien to the normal course of human affairs" in the process of identifying characters with disabilities; "To represent disability is to engage oneself in an encounter with that which is believed to be off the map of "recognizable" human experiences"<sup>17</sup>. Part of the way this is done is by removing mediatory or accommodation points from the depiction. Mitchell and Snyder note an example where a wheelchair user has to be moved into a boat<sup>18</sup>. Through a scene transition, the woman is somehow moved, but the process is left out of view.

The problem is not necessarily the transition itself, but the lack of audience knowledge in order to fill in the gaps. As Meynell notes, audiences can often extrapolate from what is shown to figure out a general idea of what is going on. This occurs in literature all of the time; writers will use scene transitions to move time along and omit unnecessary details. However, when creators do it with cases that are not day-to-day occurrences for most of the audience, they give the audience reasons to skip over the necessity of those moments. Meynell's analysis of causal systems and the viewer's participation makes it clear here that without the audience knowing what exactly is skipped in the transition, they will ignore the transition itself since it is otherwise unintelligible. Given that this process of accommodation and having to negotiate the

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<sup>17</sup> Mitchell and Snyder p. 5

<sup>18</sup> p. 22

environment in which the disabled person must navigate is put out of the audience's minds, they do not take with them the necessity, or even the possibility of the need for accommodation in reality. Since representations are inherently both a mirror of reality and, in the case of literature and art in general, an indication of the imaginative possibilities of changing said reality, without an accurate account of these processes of accommodation, non-disabled audience members without close relations to a disabled person will not be able to imagine, much less assist in, said processes.

This is also why the removal of disability itself repeatedly in media representation becomes a major problem, particularly in the audience forgetting its very existence. Disability is used in media as a way of grounding abstract ideas in something tangible; the bodies of disabled characters give embodied meaning to the problems the narrative is attempting to address, and in the process of removing the problem, the creator must also remove the disability in some way.<sup>19</sup> Mitchell and Snyder state that “narrative approaches disability as a wound in need of addressing, and thus the narrative act completed only to the extent that the breach is healed and a disruptive anomaly is concealed”<sup>20</sup>. The resolution of the text can only come about with the “resolution” of the disabled character. Insofar as the story concludes without the disability, the audience cannot take with it the lasting impression of the disabled character, or even the possibility of said character's extension beyond the scope of the narrative.

### **Removing of Discomfort: Fear of Vulnerability and Wilful Ignorance**

I believe the desire to forget disability in media can be explained using Nancy Tuana's conception of Wilful Ignorance in her essay “The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women's Health

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<sup>19</sup> p. 62

<sup>20</sup> P. 164

Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance.” Though Tuana’s account focuses on specific examples from the women’s health movement, it can highlight the self-deception that occurs, typically with non-disabled persons, out fear of vulnerability and limitation. This fear uses Wilful Ignorance as a coping mechanism, and in doing so must justify cases of vulnerability and disability as isolated, socially-removed cases.

Tuana’s discussion notes the active maintenance Wilful Ignorance in social systems in order to perpetuate, in particular, racism. This form of ignorance is not a mere passive lack of knowing, but an active lack of knowing and of not wanting to know<sup>21</sup>. Ignorance in this case is both determined by acts of individuals as well as their negligence; it is not passive, and often it is there to maintain strongly held beliefs about a privileged conception of reality. In her discussion, Tuana notes that Elizabeth Spelman argues that Wilful Ignorance is “an achievement that must be managed”<sup>22</sup>. It is a desire for the facts of systematic racism, in this case, to be false, “coupled by a fear that they are not, but where the consequences of their being true are so high, it is better to cultivate ignorance”<sup>23</sup>. Ignorance here allows for individuals to be committed to the facts being false without actually believing them to be false, since the act of believing here would entail the possibility that the facts are true.

Wilful Ignorance is not confined to individuals deceiving themselves, but it “is a systematic process of self-deception” that affects those in privileged positions where they can ignore the exploitation and their own role in its perpetuation. In regards to the women’s health movement, Tuana notes the “widespread involuntary sterilization of women of colour and disabled women was one instance of exploitation that [the movement] sought to reveal...[while]

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<sup>21</sup> Tuana p.10

<sup>22</sup> Tuana p. 11

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

white and able-bodied women were requesting voluntary sterilization”<sup>24</sup>. Efforts attempting to reveal the involuntary sterilization were met, according to Tuana, with “defensive denial” while white women seeking voluntary sterilization were not very successful<sup>25</sup>. Even social movements often ignore or remain ignorant of the oppression of other minority groups while working to change their own positions. It is not necessarily a malicious intent as much as it is a self-denial of the situations of other that may be perceived as negatively impacting the efforts of certain social movements as well as, in the case of disability, a discomfort that some are unable to deal with.

The forgetting of disability representation existing in media, as well as the need to remove disability within that media is part of “a systematic process of self-deception” that arises out of a desire for the reality of disabled persons to be either not the case, or isolated cases. It stems from a fear of vulnerability and limitation, and this fear prompts people, in denial of the fragility and finitude of living beings, which includes humanity, to assume that situations such as disability will not happen to them. These cases are then seen as isolated, or due to the fault of the disabled person. This ignores the very real relational nature of disability, being a product of a myriad of different social structures interacting with a real limitation or impairment.

Mitchell and Snyder note that “Kriegel and Longmore argued in tandem that disability portrayals could be understood as cathartic revenge by the stigmatizers, who punish the stigmatized to alleviate their own worries about bodily vulnerability and inhumane social conditions”<sup>26</sup>. Part of the narration of the disability in media, the story told about disability, is one that attempts to bring deviation and “the body’s unruliness under control”<sup>27</sup>. Disability is

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<sup>24</sup> Tuana p.11

<sup>25</sup> p.12

<sup>26</sup> Mitchell and Snyder p. 19

<sup>27</sup> P. 6

something that within the narrative must be overcome *by the disabled person* or put out from sight in some way. While not all representations fall into negative portrayals or stem from malicious intent, disability is even left out of accounts of the success of disabled creators. As Leonard Davis states “successful disabled people...have their disability erased by the success”<sup>28</sup>. Alexander Pope, Lord Byron, Milton, are all examples of successful and wide-reaching writers that have had their disabilities ‘overlooked’ in a sense because of their success, and in turn the influence of their disability on their work has been ignored.

Fears about vulnerability and limitation are easily pacified by seeing instances of it cured or removed, as well as when the instances themselves seem far removed from actual social and political contexts. Wilful Ignorance, then, helps to explain the motivation behind many of these removals or curing of disability in the media. It is easier, and maintains someone’s understanding of reality, to not have to face real examples of limitation and vulnerability. At the same time, disability in media becomes a spectacle, something that is often kept private now out-in-the-open and on display, which is in part what draws an audience. However, the narrative of any media that depicts disability must end with the disability being removed or cured in order to give the audience a sense of relief and resolution. Thus, despite the available resources on disability to inform better representations, the not wanting to know, as well as the satisfaction that comes from seeing fears put out of potential personal harm, allows for a continuation of Wilful Ignorance and allows the minds of most audience members to put disability out of their conceptions of reality.

### **Academic Forgetting Through Exclusion and Distancing**

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<sup>28</sup> Qrd. Mitchell and Snyder p. 30

Shelley Tremain in her work “Knowing Disability, Differently” argues that, “exceptions notwithstanding, the apparatus (dispositif) of disability continues to be left out of feminist and other critical philosophical analyses”<sup>29</sup>. Specifically, philosophical and academic fields “do not consider how disability conditions what they examine, how they examine what they examine, nor why they examine what they examine” which in turn maintains a form of epistemological ignorance within the “discussions of epistemological ignorance themselves”<sup>30</sup>. Her discussion looks at the ways in which Fricker and Medina individually attempt to use epistemological frameworks of ignorance to analyze the trial of Robinson in *How to Kill a Mockingbird* and critiques the way in which neither philosopher accounts for disability in their analysis. While Tremain’s own analysis of *Mockingbird* provides crucial insight into the testimonial injustice that Robinson faces, she provides a breakdown of what she believes an improved intersectional analysis ought to look at:

“...(1) how the constitution of elements of the apparatus of disability is inextricably interwoven with the constitution of social identities that other apparatuses of power produce and thus contributes to their constitution; (2) how the apparatus of disability is constituted by and through these other identities categories; and, in addition (3) how credibility assessments are conferred and withheld on the basis of the proximity of these identity categories to a conception of normality and hence contribute to the mechanism of normalization that the apparatus of disability produces.”<sup>31</sup>

For the purpose of this essay, Tremain’s breakdown is sufficient in showing that the inclusion of disability in academic analysis is highly possible, and the lack of inclusion itself ignores important components of intersectionality.

The lack of inclusion, however, can be accounted for by Mitchell and Snyder’s discussion on the separation of disability from early social movements. They state that “As

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<sup>29</sup> Tremain p. 1

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Tremain p. 6

feminist, race, and sexuality studies sought to unmoor their identities from debilitating physical and cognitive associations, they inevitably positioned disability as the “real” limitation from which they must escape”<sup>32</sup>. In redefining the “gendered, racial, and sexual differences as textually produced,” these movements distanced themselves “from the “real” of physical or cognitive aberrancy projected onto their figures”<sup>33</sup>. This created a divide between disability and other marginalized groups, since to be disabled became the “real” deviancy or problem to be fixed. Disability communities also played a part in this division, creating false hierarchies where those who could “pass” as able-bodied, or could be made to appear passable through the use of prosthetics, would rank higher than those who could not because of them having physical or cognitive disability that could not be made tolerable<sup>34</sup>. As Mitchell and Snyder state, “the “real” stigma of a disability deforms the otherwise evident value of gender and race as cultural differences”<sup>35</sup>.

This separation is, in part, perpetuated by literature which often uses disability as a way of making a character stand out “but this exceptionality divorces him or her from a shared social identity”<sup>36</sup>. Disregarding and actively distinguishing disability as not a legitimate cultural difference, these beliefs from early social movements have continued to be perpetuated implicitly, seemingly, in both media and academic disciplines. Tremain notes that the disregard for disability studies and scholars “is starkly evident in the abundance of ableist metaphors” that they use<sup>37</sup>, and Mitchell and Snyder have made it clear that “while stories to rely upon the

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<sup>32</sup> Mitchell and Snyder p. 2

<sup>33</sup> p. 3

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> p. 33

<sup>36</sup> P. 55

<sup>37</sup> Tremain p. 1

potency of disability as a symbolic figure, they rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions”<sup>38</sup>.

While Tuana accounts for disability in her examples of Wilful Ignorance, she primarily leaves this example unexplained and does not use further examples of disability to influence her Taxonomy of Ignorance overall. In addition, her initial defining of Wilful Ignorance is situated in sources that look only at race. As Mitchell and Snyder point out, what makes disability distinct from other minority marks, is its “unambiguous ability to impact every other identity category at any time,” but it continues to remain “unrecognized as a form of cultural alliance in academia and in public life”<sup>39</sup>. This follows closely with Tremain’s account of the lack of academic analysis that takes disability scholars and studies into consideration in their work. Due to the nature of disability, it intersects with every other identity category, making it often integral to the full understanding of the situations in which marginalized folks find themselves in. Since, as Mitchell and Snyder note, “the *interdependency* of disability living constitutes an important factor in achieved independence” and that academic research itself is also inherently interdependent in character,<sup>40</sup> absence of a regard for disability in any philosophical or academic analysis that looks at marginalized groups overall not only makes the analysis incomplete, it denies the important overlaps and interdependencies that occur in these groups as well as in academia itself. Thus Tuana’s Wilful Ignorance and her Taxonomy of Ignorance would benefit from a more explicit look at disability when going forward within discussions on ignorance. Perhaps this is not a task for Tuana herself, but using her concepts as a starting ground for a fuller taxonomy of ignorance, others ought to take disability into further consideration.

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<sup>38</sup> Mitchell and Snyder p. 48

<sup>39</sup> p. x

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

Tremain maintains that as “long as philosophers of social epistemology continue to exclude consideration of the apparatus of disability from their work, the critical scope, political integrity, and transformative potential of this work will remain limited.”<sup>41</sup> It is necessary that disability be realized “as a category of human difference that cannot be absorbed into a homogenizing scheme of a people's shared attributes”<sup>42</sup> within academic discourses as well as media. Mitchell and Snyder maintain that since “disability is the product of an interaction between individual differences and social environments...then the contrast between discourses of disability situates art and literature as necessary to reconstructing the dynamics of this historical interaction”<sup>43</sup>. Given this, literature should also be seriously considered in the study of epistemological ignorance.

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<sup>41</sup> Tremain p.8

<sup>42</sup> Mitchell and Snyder p.44

<sup>43</sup> P. 43

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