

Re-embodying "Sight": Representations of Blindness in
Critical Theory and Disability Studies

by

Katelyn Cove

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Religion
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg

Copyright © 2011 by Katelyn Cove

Thesis Abstract

In my thesis I engage selected texts of Jacques Derrida, David Wills, and Jean-Luc Nancy in order to draw on specific motifs that are relevant for a thinking of sight and blindness. The motifs on which I elaborate are immediacy, prosthesis, and extension respectively. In consecutive chapters, based on close readings of these selected texts and the development of these motifs in them, my study elaborates on the relevance of the work of these three thinkers for a thinking of sight and blindness that does not conform to the hierarchical dualisms of Western metaphysics. Following this, I engage three texts by selected theorists from the large and growing field of disability studies—Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Lennard Davis, David T. Mitchell, and Susan L. Snyder—in order to make the case that disability studies has not yet challenged its own metaphysical assumptions.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One – Jacques Derrida: The Tradition of Immediacy.....	7
Chapter Two – David Wills: The Originary Prosthetization of the Human.....	37
Chapter Three – Jean-Luc Nancy: The Body of Extension.....	60
Chapter Four – Representations of Blindness in Disability Studies.....	84
Conclusion.....	114
Bibliography.....	121

Chapter 1

Introduction

My primary argument in this thesis is that the field of disability studies has, generally speaking, left crucial metaphysical assumptions unchallenged. That is to say, the work of disability theorists reaffirms the post-Cartesian binary between mind and body, and the assumption that embodied human life emerges first as absolute presence. Following from this, a number of disability theorists conceive of disability as a deviation from some idealized “natural” integrality. Although the aim of disability theorists is generally to emancipate people with disabilities from their position on the margins of subjectivity, their methods of doing so, when they neglect to address their own metaphysical assumptions, often reconfigure the violent hierarchy between mind and body, and thus abled and disabled. In my attempt to present this argument, I am also interested in drawing much-needed points of connection between critical theory and disability theory, so as to suggest ways that disability theory would benefit from more critical readings of the continental tradition. I also consider ways that critical theory might benefit from engaging with the work of disability scholars.

I consult the work of three contemporary critical theorists, Jacques Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (1993), David Wills’ *Prosthesis* (1995), and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Corpus* (2008). By reading three selected motifs—immediacy, prosthesis, and extension, respectively—in these three texts, I consider how the work of these authors suggests ways of thinking about sight and blindness that do not conform to the hierarchical dualisms of Western metaphysics. The thread that weaves through my readings of these three theorists is the motif of presence, a fundamental

assumption of the Western metaphysical tradition. Derrida's, Wills', and Nancy's theorization of my selected motifs challenge this fundamental assumption. Finally, my chapter on disability studies engages three texts selected from the large and growing disability studies literature in order to make the case that disability studies has not yet questioned its own metaphysical assumptions. The texts I have selected are Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), David T. Mitchell and Susan L. Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2001), and Lennard Davis' *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (2002).

My thesis is significant for several reasons. First, since questions concerning disability are beginning to be considered in critical theory, examining the thinking of "blindness" in the work of three major critical theorists is relevant for the burgeoning disability studies field. As well, by bringing critical theory into engagement with disability theory, my thesis demonstrates the importance of critical theory, specifically the work of Wills, Derrida, and Nancy, for disability studies. There has been little work done that brings these two theoretical fields together. Furthermore, although Freud enters my thesis only peripherally, it is my understanding that his work has yet to be brought to bear on questions of disability. Since Derrida, Wills, and Nancy are all readers of Freud, throughout my thesis I point to the ways that Freud's work has influenced their theorization of my selected motifs. Finally, I hope that the interdisciplinarity of this study will lend itself to new avenues of research not only within disability studies and critical theory but also across disciplines.

The methodology of my three critical theorists might be characterized as "double,"

or what Derrida calls a “double gesture or double stratification” (*Positions* 59), in that, in their development of these motifs—immediacy, prosthesis, and extension—my selected thinkers *both* destabilize the traditional binaries of metaphysics *and* suggest new, non-dual, ways of thinking disability. In my reading of their works, I attempt to demonstrate *how* they destabilize these traditional binaries, and I also point to ways in which their work is important for thinking about “disability,” particularly “blindness.” In my chapter on disability studies, I attempt the “double writing” that my selected thinkers practice, reading my selected works of disability studies in ways that have them open themselves to the metaphysical assumptions they leave unquestioned. That is to say, I attempt to draw out the post-Cartesian binaries that undergird their characterization of disability, and, since I am also interested in establishing a conversation between critical theory and disability theory, I also turn to my selected disability texts in order to suggest ways that they can be of use to critical theory’s theorization of the “human” and the human body.

My thesis opens with a critical reading of Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind* in order to examine how Derrida addresses ways in which blindness has been represented in the Western tradition. Derrida has always been, in one way or another, interested in blindness. As Nancy remarks in his tribute to Derrida that closes *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*, blindness was a theme that Derrida favoured (313). Perhaps, then, it is not entirely surprising that I have included Derrida here as one of my principle theorists. Of course, also, the title of my selected text—*Memoirs of the Blind*—suggests its significance for thinking about blindness. I use *Memoirs* in particular to explore how Derrida deals with the idealization of sight that is prevalent in Western metaphysics and how he characterizes this tradition as a metaphysics of “seeing.” That is, this tradition idealizes sight by aligning it

with pure rational perception. Derrida reads blindness against this particular metaphysics. Rather than characterizing blindness as a loss of immediacy, Derrida suggests that blindness complicates the notion of immediacy that is privileged in this tradition. Derrida's notion of the trace—or memory trace, or the trait of painting, etc.—haunts his discussion of blindness since the object of the gaze necessarily eludes the grasp of sight. It cannot be called up and made seen. A conception of sight must then include a necessary blindness, a blindness that might be characterized as prior to sight.

In the third chapter I examine the motif of prosthesis in Wills's book *Prosthesis*. For Wills, prosthesis occurs as “a rapid transfer” into otherness, an otherness which the body must bear (12-13). Wills challenges the notion of the self-referential “I,” holding that the “I” should always, necessarily be read as a prosthetic “I” (19). Contesting notions of the originary integrity of the body, Wills conceives of the human as constituted by its own prosthetic origins. For Wills, this prosthesis is an articulation of difference that was there at the beginning of what we call “human” (31). By reconceiving “prosthesis,” Wills's work challenges conceptions of blindness as a prosthetic state. With this, Wills destabilizes the dualist construction sight/blindness, abled/disabled.

I turn to Nancy's *Corpus* in my fourth chapter. Like Wills, Nancy does not extensively consider blindness in this text. However, the motif of extension that emerges from *Corpus* has significant implications for a thinking of sight and blindness. For Nancy, the body constitutes a spacing of space; it is spatial in the sense that it is *open* space (17). As well, the body does not reside in the language of “mind” or “body.” Rather, it exists, for Nancy, as the limit between them (17). Existing in this liminal state, Nancy conceives of the body—keeping in mind that this is not the “body” of the post-Cartesian mind/body

dualism—as perpetually externalizing, *partes extra partes*, thus never actually “itself” (see 29). Significant for his discussion of extension are Nancy's thoughts on the senses: he undercuts the boundary created between body and sense in the metaphysical tradition and challenges any notion of the ideality of sense, conceiving of the body of sense instead as ending such an ideality since sense is not part of a closed circuit that only returns or refers to itself (23). Nancy's work problematizes ideas of blindness that pitch it against this idealization of sense.

Finally, I turn my attention to disability theory in Chapter Five, reading Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies*, David T. Mitchell and Susan L. Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*, and Lennard Davis' *Bending Over Backwards*. These texts represent various contemporary trends in the field. I read them through the lens of critical theory in order to query whether or not there is a paradigm of blindness that is characterized in disability studies. I bring these two critical traditions together to demonstrate how disability theory often leaves the metaphysical assumptions criticized by Derrida, Nancy, and Wills unexamined. Drawing on the motifs I examine in the preceding chapters, I argue that within disability studies blindness is represented as a loss of immediacy, a prosthetic state, or is characterized as a state of extension. By presenting blindness as such, the disabled body is always relegated to a secondary position as other, despite the efforts on behalf of disability studies to do the opposite. However, in an attempt to suggest points of contact between my two fields—critical theory and disability theory—I also consider the ways that certain texts from disability studies can help with critical theory's own theorizing of the human body. I argue that Davis' work, in which he characterizes the identity of “disability” as malleable and unstable, proposes a useful way of thinking about subjectivity in general,

not just that of “disability.” In this way, I hope to establish points of much-needed connection between these two fields.

Chapter 2

Jacques Derrida: The Tradition of Immediacy

[I]t is as if seeing were forbidden in order to draw, as if one drew only on the condition of not seeing, as if the drawing were a declaration of love destined for or suited to the invisibility of the other—unless it were in fact born from seeing the other withdrawn from sight.
- Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*

Do the seers know that they see? Do the non-seers know that they see differently? What do we see? Do eyes see that they see? Some see and do not know that they see. They have eyes and do not see that they do not see.
- Hélène Cixous, *Veils*

In 1991, Jacques Derrida helped curate an exhibition at the Louvre that inaugurated a series called *Parti Pris (Memoirs vii)*.¹ The exhibit, originally titled *L'ouvre où ne pas voir (The*

¹ For an interesting response to the exhibition and commentary on it see Meyer Raphael Rubinstein's "Seen Unseen" in *Art in America* 79.4 (April 1991): 47-53. Michael Kelly also covers the exhibition and the accompanying book in *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics* (2003). In his brief and unabashedly polemical treatment of Derrida and the Louvre exhibition, Kelly holds that "[i]conoclasm is [. . .] a natural effect of *Derrida's* conception of art based on the principles of undecidability and indeterminacy" (108, italics in original). However, it seems to me that Kelly's reading of Derrida misses the point of the Louvre exhibition completely. To cite a brief example, Kelly appeals to Derrida's claim that he suffers a "double infirmity," knowing neither how to draw, nor how to *look* at a drawing (MB 36). According to Kelly, this second infirmity is "inexcusable in this case, since he was, after all, the curator" (110). Furthermore, Kelly goes as far as to hold that "[i]f philosophy (in the form of deconstruction of any other theoretical paradigm) is going to continue to critique painting, it should first reassess the conception of painting it is critiquing instead of reinstating the mimetic conception of painting, which is what Derrida did, despite the fact that he said he wanted to subvert it" (124). Rather, Kelly argues, "the act of subversion is best and rightfully [be] left to the painters" (124).

While Kelly understands Derrida's hypotheses and some of the implications of them, he fails to appreciate Derrida's overall agenda. Kelly holds that, for Derrida, art is "ontologically deficient" (117), which, for Kelly, is further demonstrated not only in Derrida's philosophy but in the juxtaposition of the works of art with selections of text at the exhibition. For Kelly, Derrida's iconoclasm has devastating consequences for discussions of art, specifically drawing.

Open Where Not to See) but finally *Memoirs of the Blind*, juxtaposed works of art with selections of text by Derrida, his commentaries on the various pieces (Krell 51). Alongside the exhibition, Derrida released a book, titled *Mémoires d'aveugle: L'autoportrait et autres ruines* (1990), translated as *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (1993). It includes forty-four works of art from the exhibition, along with twenty-seven other works, and thorough readings of them all by Derrida (see *Memoirs* viii). I introduce this chapter with quotations from the text in question and from Hélène Cixous's short piece, "Savoir," which Derrida responds to in their co-authored *Veils* (2001), in order to bring to our attention at the outset the significant motifs of this chapter.² If *Memoirs of the Blind* is about one thing, it is about the debt to blindness that is at the origin of drawing (see *Memoirs* viii). While Cixous is not primarily concerned with drawing, although one could certainly tease out such themes from "Savoir," her text emphasizes the complicated relationship between sight and blindness. Derrida, too, explores this relationship which, he argues, is not one of mutual exclusivity. Rather, as I hope to demonstrate in the pages that

Kelly pits writing against art, holding that, for Derrida, "writing benefits from art's powerlessness" (115). What Kelly fails to point out is that for Derrida, there exists a blindness inherent in *every* act of signification—not just art. Contrary to what Kelly might think, Derrida's aim in the exhibition and the book was not to point to any deficiency in art in particular. Rather, Derrida reads selected works of art in a way that opens them to the metaphysics of blindness that is constitutive of traditional Western metaphysics. Kelly concludes that "Derrida conveniently places himself in the position of saying that he can see without seeing that to which the artist is blind. He can see the invisibility that makes the visibility possible; he can see the condition of drawing that the artist cannot see" (120). Again, here Kelly misreads Derrida since, for Derrida, the issue is not who sees correctly.

² Derrida and Cixous co-authored *Veils*, which is comprised of Cixous's short piece, "Savoir," and Derrida's response, "A Silkworm of One's Own." The text, as a whole, represents a long meditation on questions concerning autobiography and truth. I explore Cixous's text in the pages that follow. For his part, Derrida considers truth in relation to revelation in the Western metaphysical tradition. Keeping with the primary motif of Cixous's text, Derrida suggests that, in the Western tradition, truth is something that is veiled, that necessarily finds itself needing to be unveiled, or uncovered.

follow, sight and blindness haunt each other in a play of co-implication that problematizes Western metaphysics' understanding of pure immediacy.

For Derrida, the motif of immediacy, of which he is critical, is intimately connected to the way blindness has been represented in the Western tradition. For this reason, a discussion of blindness in Derrida's work is invariably a discussion of the question of the claimed immediacy of presence. Although Derrida addresses immediacy in all of his works in one way or another, beginning with *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry* (1962) and *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (1967), this motif is especially significant for a thinking of blindness in *Memoirs of the Blind*. In this text, Derrida explores representations of blindness that emerge in paintings from the Western tradition of "high art," along with the implications of these representations for a contemporary metaphysics of sight. My aim in this chapter is to demonstrate the importance of *Memoirs of the Blind* for questioning the motif of immediacy—and the importance of immediacy for a thinking of blindness as loss or lack. In short, I propose to approach the broader theme of blindness through the lens of "immediacy."

I begin this chapter with Derrida's reading of the paintings from the Louvre exhibition, paintings that, according to Derrida, exemplify the "metaphysics of sight" characteristic of the Western metaphysical tradition. He reads them in such a way that has them open themselves to a "condition of blindness" that haunts them, a condition, according to Derrida, that we all share. From here, I give a brief overview of the place of "immediacy" in the Western tradition of philosophy, considering how it is assumed in this tradition that one can be fully present to oneself through the idealized, interiorization of the mind. The motif of presence will, under one guise or another, be a motif that runs

throughout this thesis. Furthermore, I turn to sight in relation to this tradition, arguing that the idealization of voice, touch, and sight are inseparable. Finally, I conclude this chapter with what might be called the “truth of the eyes,” that is, weeping and its relationship to Derrida’s writing on blindness.

A Universal Condition of Blindness

One of Derrida’s primary concerns in *Memoirs of the Blind* is to read the paintings from the Louvre exhibition, paintings which, according to Derrida, exemplify the “metaphysics of sight” that is characteristic of the Western metaphysical tradition, in such a way that allows them to open themselves to the condition of blindness that haunts them. The “metaphysics of sight” is characterized by Derrida as the metaphysical assumption that equates “sight,” by which he means a visual perception divorced from the body, with rationality and a self-presence that is made possible through absolute immediacy.³ That is to say, in this

³ Derrida’s characterization of the Western tradition as privileging the sense of sight as idealized is not new. Other theorists have written on Western philosophy’s preoccupation with sight, such as Martin Jay’s “Scopic Regimes of Modernity” in *Vision and Visuality* (1988) and *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1994); and David Michael Levin’s *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (1988), as well as, as editor, *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* (1997) and *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (1993). However, in these writers’ studies they refer to the privileging of sight as ocularcentrism. I do not turn to these texts specifically in my thesis since in their account of the Western tradition, in which they include Derrida, as ocularcentric or anti-vision, they are misreading Derrida since vision, in Derrida’s work, is not denigrated in favour of blindness. Rather, Derrida’s reading of the Louvre paintings, paintings which exemplify the metaphysics of sight, has it open itself to a necessary blindness that is constitutive of vision itself. In this way, vision cannot be thought of as divorced from blindness since visual experience is necessarily obscured by a certain blindness—think of, just as an example, the moment of the blink of the eye. As a result, viscosity cannot assume any ability to call upon an image in the present since there is no immediate “vision.” Derrida challenges the sight that comes with the idealized visual perception of the Western tradition since, by characterizing vision as constituted by a condition of blindness, this visual perception that

tradition, sight is associated with knowledge—most importantly knowledge of oneself. As a result, sight’s supposed “other,” blindness, is characterized as ontologically deficient or as rational obfuscation. According to Derrida, this assumption that equates sight with rationality has its foundations in Greek myth and in the Hebrew Bible and can be traced through the paintings of blindness at the Louvre exhibition (MB 18).⁴ However, Derrida reads these paintings in such a way that has them open themselves to a necessary condition of blindness, a condition that, according to Derrida, is inherent in every graphic act—whether it is painting or writing. This condition of blindness points to a necessary blindness that is constitutive of vision itself. By appealing to this condition of blindness, Derrida suggests that vision cannot be conceived of as divorced from blindness, that the vision that comes with the eyes’ sight is necessarily blind—as a result of which, visuality can never assume to be able to call upon an image into absolute presence. This condition of blindness points to a primordial blindness that constitutes “sight,” a blindness that all humans share. Derrida develops this in *Memoirs of the Blind* by posing two hypotheses at the beginning of the text.

Derrida introduces *Memoirs of the Blind* with these two hypotheses in order to

assumes the ability to know the self is overturned.

⁴ Leonard Lawlor suggests in *The Implications of Immanence* (2006) that Derrida’s project in *Memoirs of the Blind* may be more than just a deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence. Noting how frequently Derrida draws on the Christian tradition in *Memoirs*, such as Augustine’s *Confessions*, the story of Tobit and Tobias, and Paul’s conversion experience, Lawlor speculates that the text “opens up the ‘wider’ project of a deconstruction of Christianity” (41). Lawlor appeals to Derrida’s reading of Paul’s conversion specifically, saying that Derrida’s comment that “Paul’s confession [. . .] will have come to represent the model of the self-portrait, the model of the one that concerns us here” (MB 117), means that “Paul’s conversion to Christianity is the very model of everything Derrida has been speaking of in *Memoirs of the Blind*” (Lawlor 41). Lawlor continues by appealing to Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (2008).

develop this condition of blindness. The first hypothesis is that “the drawing is blind, if not the draftsman or draftswoman” (2). The implication of this hypothesis is that the operation of drawing “would in some way regard blindness” (2). This first hypothesis implies a second: that “an eye graft, the grafting of one point of view onto the other: a drawing of the *blind* is a drawing of the blind” (2).⁵ In other words, Derrida postulates that the blind person that the draftsman draws is himself. He continues,

Every time a draftsman lets himself be fascinated by the blind, every time he makes the blind a *theme* of his drawing, he projects, dreams, or hallucinates a figure of a draftsman, or sometimes, more precisely, a draftswoman. Or more precisely still, he begins to *represent* a drawing potency at work, the very act of drawing. He invents drawing. The *trait* is not then paralyzed in a tautology that folds the same onto the same. On the contrary, it becomes prey to *allegory*, to this strange self-portrait of drawing given over to the speech and gaze of the other. The subtitle of all these scenes of the blind is thus: *the origin of drawing*. (2-3)⁶

⁵ All emphases in Derrida's texts are from the original unless otherwise stated.

⁶ In *Memoirs of the Blind* Derrida acknowledges at the outset that he is talking about both a draftsman and a draftswoman. However, I use the male form when referring to the artist since I wish to emphasize that this metaphysics of sight is very much a filial tradition. Derrida notes this tradition of filiation when he discusses paintings inspired, most notably, by biblical stories, such as that of Tobit and Tobias, where a son restores his father's sight. Furthermore, Derrida's discussion of blindness is haunted by the figure of the feminine since the vision of conscious perception that assumes the possibility of capturing an image and bringing it into immediacy is always a masculine one. In order to conceive of a new way of thinking blindness, Derrida brings the figure of the feminine to bear on this filial sight that assumes that with visual perception comes absolute self-presence. This blindness is one that is constitutive of the human being. For Derrida, it is the figure of the feminine that haunts us as a figure of originary blindness. That is to say, contrary to the vision of the filial tradition, Derrida proposes that blindness is constitutive of our being as humans, an ontology he approaches through the figure of woman. If this woman has a name, Derrida suggests, it might be Psyche. I turn to Psyche's role in discussions of blindness in my chapter on Jean-Luc Nancy, who discusses Psyche at length in *Corpus*.

Very significantly, at the origin of drawing, Derrida notes, is not the figure of the son, but the figure of the draftswoman (see *Memoirs* 2), such as Butades (5-6n1). In *The Purest of Bastards* (2000) David Krell points out that the question of sexual difference “was implied in the initial moment of the exhibition, with the daughter of Butades ('more precisely, some draftswoman') as the origin of drawing” (75). The painting of Butades has her leaning over her lover's shoulder, tracing his shadow on a wall. She concentrates on the shadow of his figure but not his actual form. Pointing to this image, Derrida holds that “[f]rom the outset, perception

The inference made in these hypotheses is that, if the draftsman is drawing himself, he is drawing blind. “In short,” John D. Caputo summarizes, “because the drawing of itself is done in the blind, and the drawing is the work of blind men, drawings of the blind are a kind of self-portrait of the artist, an allegory about the ‘origin of drawing’” (318). Further on, Derrida expands on the implications of these hypotheses when he writes, “[a]s soon as the draftsman considers himself, fascinated, fixed on the image, yet disappearing before his own eyes into the abyss, the movement by which he tries desperately to recapture himself is already, in its very present, an act of memory” (*Memoirs* 68). With this abyss between the subject of his drawing and his representation, the artist is necessarily blind to his own drawing, unable to feast his eyes on both his subject and his drawing simultaneously. Derrida uses these self-portraits of blindness to suggest that they are paradigmatic of the act of graphing in general, pointing to a blindness that is inherent not just to drawing or painting, but to *all* graphing.

Derrida’s reading of the paintings in the Louvre exhibition uncovers a condition of blindness that belongs to every act of signification—to every graphic act, whether of writing or painting. That is to say, the signatory mark is haunted by a certain blindness, jeopardizing the stability of the relationship between vision and knowledge.⁷ Rather than

belongs to recollection” (*Memoirs* 51). He continues, “Butades writes, and thus already loves in nostalgia. Detached from the present of perception, fallen from the thing itself—which is thus divided—a shadow is a simultaneous memory, and Butades’ stick is a staff of the blind” (51). If the moment that inaugurates blindness stems from memory, it must also be intimately connected to the fragments that are lost to memory, those necessarily forgotten. Once again, this image of Butades challenges the masculine vision of immediacy, opting for a conception of blindness as a necessary component of the gaze. The vision of this gaze is not one that attempts to call on the other to represent itself. Rather, it accepts what is out of reach of conscious perception. The gaze of this vision is one veiled by tears.

⁷ Derrida’s own experience of impaired vision haunts the text. During the preliminary stages of the

portraying blindness as a loss of presence, Derrida's reading of these paintings opens them to a condition of blindness that thwarts the privileged notion of immediacy. Furthermore, he characterizes sight as constituted by a necessary blindness and, in this way, sight and blindness cannot be thought of as separate from one another. Rather, they are intimately bound up together. Challenging the possibility of attaining pure self-presence, a possibility that is only available to able-bodied, human beings in the metaphysics of sight, Derrida locates a condition of blindness that haunts every idealized "sight." For Derrida, this is a condition which is universal in the sense that it is a condition that we all share. As David Farrell Krell writes in *The Purest of Bastards: Works of Mourning, Art, and Affirmation in the Thought of Jacques Derrida*, in *Memoirs of the Blind* "the blind spot becomes more than an anatomico-physiological detail about vision; it becomes a figure of human vision in general" (73). Derrida's reading of these paintings draws out the figure of blindness that haunts them. Moreover, the condition of blindness problematizes the basic tenets of the metaphysics of sight.

Blindness belongs to the act of graphing since the draftsman is blind to his own drawing. With this being the case, the draftsman draws from memory since from the moment he looks away from what he is drawing, his subject becomes a memory. It is impossible for the draftsman to simultaneously gaze upon his subject and at his drawing. Derrida writes that "it is as if seeing were forbidden in order to draw, as if one drew only on the condition of not seeing" (*Memoirs* 49). The self-portrait cannot really be a self-

exhibition's organization, Derrida himself experienced a temporary facial paralysis caused by a virus that affected one of his eyes. He describes the virus as a "disfiguration, the facial nerve inflamed, the left side of the face stiffened, the left eye transfixed and horrible to behold in a mirror—a real sight for sore eyes—the eyelid no longer closing normally: a loss of the 'wink' or 'blink,' therefore, this moment of blindness that ensures sight its breath" (*Memoirs* 32). Although he is healed days later, "a ghost of disfiguration" haunts his face.

portrait since what is to be drawn cannot be seen by the blind. Thus the self-portrait appears as a ruin since it attempts to capture what was never there (*Memoirs* 68). Derrida asserts that “the desire for self-presentation is never met, it never meets up with itself, and that is why the simulacrum takes place. Never does the eye of the Other recall this desire more sovereignly to the outside and to difference, to the law of disproportion, dissymmetry and expropriation. And this is memory itself” (121). In other words, the draftsman is never able to reach a point of full self-presentation, or immediacy. There is always a gap or an abyss that exists between the draftsman and his subject. The ruin that is the picture takes the place of the attempted self-presentation. The viewer cannot ask the other to present himself in the picture. And in this way, the picture cannot fully reproduce the absent other since the other cannot be faithfully reproduced. The only things present in the picture are the ruins of this absence.

Pushing Derrida on the idea that every draftsman is blind, one voice of the polylogue that constitutes *Memoirs of the Blind* queries the severity of Derrida’s claim that every draftsman is blind. The interlocutor argues that since it is difficult to recall any draftsmen who are literally without sight, claiming exactly the opposite, that every draftsman is blind, might be “giving in to an easy provocation” (44). In response, Derrida claims that the powerlessness that “gives the experience of the gaze over to blindness” should not be interpreted in a negative way, such as an impotence or a failure (44). Derrida does not conceive of blindness as a lack, such as a loss of immediacy. Rather, this blindness “gives to the experience of drawing its *quasi-transcendental* resource” (44). That is, the very act of drawing is conditioned by its invisibility. Derrida refers to this as “drawing itself, the drawing of drawing” (41). He attempts to “transcendentalize, that is, to

ennoble an infirmity or impotence” by locating blindness at the origin of drawing (55, see also Caputo 319).

The “Figure” of Vision and Blindness

In reading *Memoirs of the Blind*, it is important to decipher how Derrida reads “vision” and “blindness.” Since Derrida finds separating the literal and the metaphorical problematic, approaching his use of “vision” and “blindness” by trying to characterize it as either literal or metaphorical ignores some of the primary tenets of Derrida’s philosophy.⁸ For instance, even though John McCumber notes that Derrida finds differentiating “literal” vision from “metaphorical” vision problematic (236), McCumber seems to miss the point, writing, “[i]f vision itself is external to philosophy, then, a metaphorized version of vision is constitutive of it. Recognizing this metaphor can teach us about philosophy. But—once again—can it tell us anything about *vision*—nonmetaphorical vision, vision itself as we *properly* experience it—through the immediacy of our flesh?” (235). As Derrida notes in *Of Grammatology*, “[i]t is not, therefore, a matter of inverting the literal meaning and the figurative meaning but of determining the ‘literal’ meaning of writing as metaphoricity itself” (15). It is important to keep in mind that when we talk about vision and blindness, we are simultaneously referring to bodily experiences of vision and blindness and their social or political dimensions. They are all bound up in the discursive construction of “vision” and “blindness.”

Derrida’s reading of these paintings allows them to open themselves up to a figure of blindness. Perhaps we can think of blindness, as Caputo explains in his reading of

⁸ See *Of Grammatology* (1976) for a reading of Derrida on the division between literal and metaphorical readings.

Memoirs, as “a structural matter, not a simple impairment or enfeebling of vision” (318). This figure of blindness haunts sight and vice versa. For Derrida, this tradition idealizes sight by privileging that which can be captured by the gaze and be made knowable. By assuming the primacy of visual perception, the Western tradition assumes that pure immediacy, or self-proximity, is possible. Although Derrida’s figural characterization of sight and blindness may be criticized for ignoring the physical experiences of blind people or those with visual impairments, for Derrida, it is problematic to conceive of blindness as either a bodily experience or a metaphor since they are not mutually exclusive. In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1978), Derrida opens phenomenology to questions regarding the idealization of “pure experience.” Furthermore, Derrida uses these self-portraits of blindness not just to point to them as works by the blind. Rather, he uses these self-portraits to suggest that they are paradigmatic of a condition of blindness that is characteristic of every act of graphing. I argue that his work on representations of blindness have significant effects for how we think of and talk about blindness and sight, which in turn has significant ethical, political, and social implications.

Blindness and the Trace

Integral to Derrida’s reading of immediacy is his concept of the trace or the trait, as he refers to it across his work, including in *Memoirs of the Blind*.⁹ This is significant for a discussion of blindness, the condition of all graphing, whether it is writing or painting, since it is precisely this trace that interrupts any possibility of pure self-presence. In a way,

⁹ Michael Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault, the translators of *Memoirs of the Blind*, note that *trait* has, for the most part, been left untranslated in the book in an effort to preserve its range of meanings, including trait, feature, line, stroke, or mark (2).

it is the trace that is at the very heart of this condition of blindness. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida states that the trace “*does not exist*, although it is never a *being-present* outside of all plenitude, its possibility is by rights anterior to all that one calls signs (signified/signifier, content/expression, etc.), concept or operation, motor or sensory” (62). Likewise, in *Memoirs of the Blind* he characterizes the trace as neither sensible, nor intelligible. Furthermore, he writes, “[i]n this twinkling of an eye, the ellipsis is not an object but a blinking of the difference that begets it” (55). For Derrida, this is the structure of every mark, whether it is the graphic trace, the trait of painting, the memory trace, speech, etc.

Derrida’s notion of the trace haunts his discussion of blindness since it, the trace, necessarily eludes the grasp of sight. That is, it cannot be grasped or brought into the immediacy of sight, challenging the idea that sight—as well as writing, graphing, or painting—can call upon and make present what it claims to re-present. Rather, the trace is necessarily *not* seen. In opposition to the fundamental assumptions of the metaphysics of sight, every act of seeing, Derrida suggests, must include a necessary blindness, a blindness that must be characterized as prior to sight. By associating sight with the possibility of immediacy, metaphysics sees in the eyes of the blind the impossibility of presence. Derrida subverts this assumption by reading sight in a way that opens it to a necessary blindness. Sight and blindness, for Derrida, are not mutually exclusive, just as they do not represent two sides of a binary. Rather, they are originally bound up with one another.

Derrida addresses the primary characteristic of the trait when he states that,

[e]ven if drawing is, as they say, mimetic, that is, reproductive, figurative, representative, even if the model is presently facing the artist, the *trait* must proceed in the night. It escapes the field of vision. Not only because it *is not yet* visible, but because it does not belong to the realm of the spectacle, of spectacular objectivity—

and so that which it makes happen or come cannot itself be mimetic. The heterogeneity between the thing drawn and the drawing *trait* remains abyssal, whether it be between a thing represented and its representation or between the model and the image. (*Memoirs* 45)

Here we see the constant deferral of the supplement, the chain of traits that are continuously engaged in a play of substitutions. The graphic act cannot fully represent the thing represented since the trait is constantly slipping away, flitting by, eluding our grasp. It is so quick that it cannot be captured. What remains after the trait has been traced, Derrida holds, is “[a] tracing, an outline, [that] cannot be seen. [. . .] Once this limit is reached, there is nothing more to see, [. . .] and this is the *trait*, this is the line itself: which is thus no longer what it is, because from then on it never relates to itself without dividing itself just as soon, the divisibility of the *trait* here interrupting all pure identification and forming” (53-54). And this limit will never be reached. It is inaccessible and drawing “signals toward this inaccessibility” (54). “*Nothing belongs to the trait,*” states Derrida, “and thus, to drawing and to the thought of drawing, even in its own ‘trace.’ Nothing even participates in it. The *trait* joins and adjoins only in separating” (54). In this way, the trait can be likened to the Freudian memory trace, a trace that is continuously eluding our grasp since as soon as it meets up with itself, it has already departed.

For Derrida, the trace is characterized by repetition, in the sense that there is never a “first time” or a “first imprint.” Rather, every first time is already a second. There is a structural possibility inherent in every mark or sign that Derrida calls “iterability,” the possibility of being repeated. This inherent possibility deprives the “original” of any power. However, crucial to a thinking of repetition is that, for Derrida, repetition is never a repetition of sameness, but a repetition of difference. In this way, repetition is not mimetic and is at odds with traditional notions of identity and meaning as fixed. Concerning the

allegory of the “origin of drawing,” Derrida writes, “[f]or if we *left* the Platonic cave a while back, it was not in order finally to see the *eidos* of the thing itself after a conversion, anabasis, or anamnesis. We left the cave behind because the Platonic speleology misses, is unable to take into account if not to see, the inappearance of a *trait* that is neither sensible nor intelligible. It misses the *trait* precisely because it believes that it sees it or lets it be seen” (*Memoirs* 55). In trying to get to the origin, all we find is the trait and even the trait cannot be found since as soon as it meets up with itself it departs from itself. I turn to this characteristic of the trait shortly. For now, Derrida writes of this “first time” or “before”:

“Before” all the “blind spots” that, literally or figuratively, organize the scopic field and the scene of drawing, “before” all that can happen *to* sight, “before” all the interpretations, ophthalmologies, and theo-psychoanalyses of sacrifice and castration, there would thus be the ecliptic rhythm of the *trait*, the blind, the abocular contraction that lets one see “from-since” the unbeseen. “Before” and “from-since”: these draw in time or space an order that does not belong to them. (55)

Derrida appeals to the story of Tobit and Tobias, the biblical tale of a son who restores his father’s sight with the help of the angel Raphael, in order to explore this infinite process of the iterable sign. Upon having his sight restored,

[Tobias] gives thanks not simply for seeing, for seeing for the sake of seeing, but for seeing his son. He weeps in gratitude, in recognition, not so much because he finally sees but because his son restores his sight by making himself visible: he restores his father’s sight *in* making himself visible and *in order to* make himself visible, he, his son, that is to say, the light that is given as the light that is received, lent, given back, exchanged. (28)

Once he regains his sight, “what Tobias sees, it seems, is neither this or that thing, this or that person, but his very sight, that very thing, that very one, his son, who restores his sight” (28), marking Tobias’s newfound sight by the blindness that preceded it.

The very nature of the trait renders it “self-eclipsing” (*Memoirs* 54). It cannot call upon itself in the present, “since it is not gathered, since it does not gather itself, into any

present, ‘I am who I am’” (54). The limit of the trait that is traced, that cannot be reached, “divides itself in its ellipsis; *by leaving* itself, and *starting from* itself, it takes leave of itself, and establishes itself in no ideal identity” (55). By parting with itself, the trait is impossible to grasp since it is constantly moving away. Samuel Weber calls this the impartability of the image or of a work of art. In *Benjamin’s –abilities* (2008), Weber explores Walter Benjamin’s habit of affixing the suffix *-barkeit* (-ability/-ibility) to verbs, changing them into nouns. Weber notes how the hyphen between the original word and the suffix marks a joining and a separation; something in this joining introduces separation, or difference. This is the structure of Derrida’s trace. In his discussion of impartability, Weber opens with an aphorism of Karl Kraus: “The more closely one looks at a word, the more distantly it looks back” (31). Impartability, in the context of Benjamin’s notion of aura, suggests that the closer one attempts to bring the aura into sight, in an attempt to grasp its essence, the further away it becomes.¹⁰ Benjamin’s theory of aura is another articulation of what Derrida calls the trace or trait.¹¹ The English word, to *impart*, Weber notes, reflects

¹⁰ Best described in Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the aura of a work of art is intimately tied to its presence, that is, its creation in a particular time and place in history. For this reason, the aura cannot be replicated or imitated (229). Technological reproduction acts as a means of destruction of the aura since a plurality of copies replaces the unique original (see Cadava 44). For Benjamin, this obsession with technological reproduction represents a drive to seize the essence of a work of art through technology (Benjamin, “The Work of Art” 229-32). But this essence cannot be grasped because it is continuously taking leave of itself. In this way, the aura might be another name for the trait of drawing or Freud’s conception of the memory trace. Important for discussions of blindness and touch in the work of art is that aura is “a phenomenon that, always signalling the appearance of a distance, implies that the gaze that the mass directs at itself can only miss its target” (Cadava 57). In other words, the closer that you attempt to bring the trait or aura of the work of art the farther away it becomes. It can never be brought into immediacy. For this reason, Eduardo Cadava notes that “the aura is always a matter of ghosts and spectres” (113).

¹¹ There has been some work done in critical theory that takes into account questions of genetics and medical ethics in ways that point to Benjamin’s concept of the aura and Derrida’s trait. In

this “double movement,” this simultaneous dividing and joining (40-41). Impartability problematizes immediacy since “[w]hat is ‘immediate’ is that which is defined by the potentiality of taking leave of itself, of its place and position, of altering itself [. . .] a virtual medium that cannot be *measured* by the possibility of self-fulfillment but by its constitutive alterability” (Weber 42).

It is the continual passing away of the trait that renders the self-portrait a ruin. The ruin is always necessarily a part of the self-portrait since, as Derrida writes,

Rosalyn Diprose’s essay, “A ‘genetics’ that makes sense,” she argues that “modern genetics does not merely make sense of bodily differences but is implicated in producing those differences, through the ways it represents itself and its objects” (Diprose and Ferrell, Introduction x). She holds that biomedical science forces us to rethink the belief that “being” and “world” are distinct and that ethics has no place in knowledge—common thinking in the sciences (“A ‘genetics’” 66). According to Diprose, although biomedical science approaches the body when it is broken, “[it] does not, of course, confess to any constitutive role in the specificity of our embodiment” (68). However, it does observe and manipulate that specificity. “This division,” Diprose writes, “between the making of the body and its manipulation is maintained by a division between theory and practice” (68).

Biomedical science claims to “know” what makes up the body and why certain bodies differ. Yet, biomedical practice can also alter or modify the human body (68). Diprose uses genetics as an example of this since genetics is seen as making up the identity of an individual. For Diprose, here lies an ethics that is intimately bound to our being-in-the-world. With genetic modification or surveillance, the aim is to have people able to “re-create himself” (69, quoting Leon Kass). “This desire to double the self,” Diprose writes, “by reproducing the self or making the other the same, is the target of concern about the role of genetic screening and manipulation in the eradication of difference” (69). These attempts to eradicate difference create a binary between superior and inferior genes. Following from this, Diprose argues that “genetic theory is itself a genetic operation” and in its attempts to produce sameness it produces difference since “both the subject and object of knowledge are always other than themselves” (71). As a result of this, “the genetic determination of bodily specificity is necessarily deferred” (71). Here we can see that genetics is an attempt to map differences. By claiming these differences to be original, “genetics is itself a process of production of origins” (74). Searching for origins leads us into a spiral since as an origin dissolves another appears. Although Diprose does not cite Derrida’s (and Heidegger’s) notion of grasping or Benjamin’s theorization of the aura, her study points to a sort of human aura that genetics attempts to grasp. Diprose concludes that “the assumption of, and desire for, sameness pervade these sciences of the body [and . . .] this urge to ‘re-create the self’ informs genetic theory as well as its practice” (75).

[i]n the beginning there is ruin. Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze. Ruin is the self-portrait, this face looked at in the face as the memory of itself, what *remains* or *returns* as a spectre from the moment one first looks at oneself and a figuration is eclipsed. [. . .] For the incompleteness of the visible monument comes from the eclipsing structure of the *trait*, from a structure that is only remarked, pointed out, impotent or incapable of being reflected in the shadow of the self-portrait. So many reversible propositions. For one can just as well read the pictures of ruins as the figures of a portrait, indeed, of a self-portrait. (*Memoirs* 68)

Since the portrait is characterized by the ruins of which it is composed, the self-portrait becomes a ruin. The image in the picture is marked by an absence. The trait that cannot be represented, made present, or called upon in the picture, marks the portrait as that of the absent other. This necessary absence constitutes the self-portrait as a ruin. This is important for my thesis since the structure of the trait, the trait that is continuously passing away from itself, that is perpetually at play in the self-portrait constitutes “the incompleteness of the visible monument.”

Derrida’s writing on Freud’s memory trace is significant here for a thinking of sight and blindness, since blind, the artist graphs from memory. In “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” Derrida notes that, for Freud, memory is a mechanism—a psychological device—of preservation that is “the very essence of the psyche” (78). Furthermore, for Freud, memory is comprised of the differences between frayings or breechings and, like writing, works by creating a network or path of traces. Derrida conceives of the Freudian memory trace as “not a pure fraying that might be retrieved at any time as a simple presence, it is the impalpable and invisible difference between frayings” (“Freud and the Scene of Writing” 78). Through fraying, writing and memory work to create a path of traces—a path of perpetual deferrals. Because memory is made of this perpetual departure, it is an unconscious text that is marked by its necessary absence, never able to be called up and

made present. As a result of which, every time we approach memory, or the past, we must start anew. According to both Freud and Derrida, memory does not work through oppositional structures (“Freud and the Scene of Writing” 78). Rather, the memory trace creates a path through these differences without attempting to establish some type of unified whole (see 77-79). It is precisely in such an understanding that we might think of the memory trace as complicating any claims to absolute presence. Furthermore, the memory trace, as Freud conceives of it, suggests that memory is subject to a condition of blindness.

The way that Derrida characterizes the hand of the blind in *Memoirs of the Blind* is intimately tied to the relationship between blindness and memory. The groping hand, Derrida argues, is a site of memory. He pauses on this point and states,

[I]et us recall that, in the case of the blind man, hearing goes *farther* than the hand, which goes *farther* than the eye. The hand has an ear for preventing the fall, that is, the *casus*, the accident; it thus commemorates the possibility of the accident, keeps it in memory. A hand is, here, the very memory of the accident. But for the one who sees, visual anticipation takes over for the hand in order to go even farther—indeed much farther. (16)

Without visual anticipation, the blind rely on the memory of the hand. We might call this groping memory. Although the hand gropes forward with the memory of the fall, it cannot go farther or take in more than the eye (16).¹² This groping memory haphazardly fumbles for the traces of the memories. As a result of this, it cannot grasp a memory and represent it. This is because, memory is unconscious. Since it is unconscious, memory itself is blind.

¹² I want to note that I do not mean to evoke images of blind people—especially blind women—as feeble and uncoordinated, as is typical of many cinematic representations of blindness and blind people. In *Sight Unseen* Georgina Kleege notes many of these portrayals, such as Uma Thurman’s in *Jennifer 8* (1992) (see Kleege’s chapter, “Blind Nightmares” 43-66). Rather, my aim is to emphasize the problems inherent in the idea of the hand that grasps and to suggest that the image of the groping hand, a hand slightly unsure of itself, is much more effective for thinking about memory.

And for this reason, it cannot be seen, called up, represented, or made visible. In this way, like the trait of the self-portrait, the memory trace skirts away as soon as we reach our hand out to grasp it. This reminds us to keep in mind that we must not trust memory's ability to recall.

Significantly, these traces are continuously being deferred. Because of this, we cannot conceive of writing, the trait, or, for my purposes here, the visual image in terms of a present, referential text or image. The unconscious text that constitutes memory can never be present and must always be approached anew. Just as with the trait, we cannot call upon the past and ever make it present (see "Freud and the Scene of Writing" 78, 92).

Furthermore, according to Derrida, the potency of the trace—or the trait—develops on the brink of blindness (*Memoirs* 4). That is: "Whether it be improvised or not, the invention of the *trait* does not follow, it does not conform to what is presently visible, to what would be set in front of me as a theme" (45). Standing before the self-portrait, the spectator is confronted with the other's absence since the trace never allows for a full visibility (45). Indeed, "[t]he heterogeneity of the invisible to the visible can haunt the visible as its very possibility [. . .] the visibility of the visible cannot, by definition, be seen" (45). This quotation brings to mind Cixous's words from the beginning of the chapter.

Cixous's Myopic Vision

In "Savoir," Cixous tells the story of a woman (herself) who undergoes surgery to correct a life-long myopia. She describes herself as having been born with "the veil in her eye," "in her soul," and opens the text by describing the strange sensation of being able to "see that she could not see, but she could not see clearly" (3). Crucially, this "native veil" is

imperceptible, invisible, undetectable (3). It is an invisibility that clouds her vision, and threatens clarity. The question of clarity is significant here since what is assumed to come from the full idealized perception of sight is absolute clarity. For Cixous, the veil acts as a medium, a “maddening magic between her and the world” (6). Standing between her and the world, Cixous’s myopia works as a process of mediation through which she views the world around her. In this way, her perception of the world is never immediate to itself since she is never completely sure of whatever she puts her trust in. For instance, she describes at the beginning of the text how she relied on a statue of Joan of Arc to navigate her way to “the castle.” When one day she finds the statue missing, she finds herself having entered a “world of shadow” (3), having “stalled at the heart of the invisible” (6).

After a lifetime of seeing through her myopia, her sight is restored by means of a surgical operation. Like Tobias, who has his sight returned to him by his son, what she sees is her sight approaching; “[i]t moved on so fast she could see herself see. She saw sight coming” (8). She writes, “[t]he mourning for the eye that becomes another eye: ‘I’ll never be short-sighted again!’ But the supplement of lightness is passing into the visible without having to break the door at every moment” (11). Cixous considers how sight depends on a recognition of loss, exclaiming “I’m *losing* my myopia!” (11). Despite characterizing her myopia as an affliction and a prison, Cixous mourns it as soon as it is lost. She describes her reaction to this mourning:

Such an experience [of existing in limbo between seeing and blindness] could take place only once, that’s what was disturbing to her. Myopia would not grow again, the foreigner would never come back to her, her myopia, so strong—a force that she had always called weakness and infirmity. But now its force, its strange force, was revealed to her, *retrospectively* at the very moment it was taken away from her. (16, my emphasis)

Although her sight is eventually restored, Cixous’s work still complicates the privilege

given to visual perception. According to Leonard Lawlor, in *The Implications of Immanence*, Derrida's work in *Memoirs of the Blind* demonstrates "the essential impossibility of eliminating mediation" (41). Cixous's work on myopia makes a similar demonstration. Although Cixous's story includes the curing of her myopia, her myopic past haunts her newfound sight "retrospectively." Indeed, she writes, "[n]ostalgia for the secret non-seeing was rising" (16). In gaining her vision, she is forced to let go of her previous myopia, "that myopia of a Tuesday in January" (16). In his response to Cixous's work, Derrida holds that we must learn from Cixous that "the vision of seeing, her seeing, her vision, was from the start in mourning of the unseen" (*Veils* 50). That is, it is only by mourning her lost not-seeing that she is able to see and this initial vision is itself a ruin.

The Western Tradition of "Immediacy"

This metaphysical tradition that Derrida addresses in *Memoirs of the Blind*, the tradition that venerates sight by aligning it with rationality and self-presence, is inseparable from the tradition's idealization of voice and touch. I explore in what follows the way in which Derrida reads the legacy of "immediacy" in the Western metaphysical tradition, this phonocentric tradition that presumes an essential relationship between the voice and the mind (see *Of Grammatology* 11), and along with this, an "absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning" (12). This tradition asserts that through the voice (which it fully idealizes), the interior dialogue with the self, one can reach the pure concept.¹³ In relation to this, in *On Touching: Jean-Luc*

¹³ In David Michael Levin's essay "Keeping Foucault and Derrida in Mind: Panopticism and the Politics of Subversion" from his edited volume *Sites of Vision*, he suggests that "the metaphysical prioritizing of *phone* (sound, voice, speech) is actually motivated by an attachment

Nancy, Derrida asserts that Western metaphysics constitutes a tradition of self-touching (see 41). By touch here, Derrida does not refer to the tactile touch of the hand. As with the metaphysics of sight, this is a touch without a body at issue. Rather, the metaphysics of touch, for Derrida, is characterized by the ideal of interiority: touch is interiorized as self-touching, as what enables the human to turn his index finger to himself, auto-affectively, and to say “I.” The ability to refer back to one-self creates a closed circuit of self-referentiality that in the tradition of metaphysics undergirds absolute presence. Although Derrida examines the metaphysics of voice, touch, and sight to demonstrate this fundamental assumption, the end result is the same: namely, that humans distinguish themselves above other beings by their claimed ability to attain full self-presence in the pure interiority of the mind.

By positing a natural relationship between voice—and touch and sight—and being, the tradition of metaphysics relegates writing to a secondary position as other, as it does with the disadvantaged sides of all subsequent binaries, such as intelligibility/sensibility, male/female, human/animal, abled/disabled, sight/blindness, etc.¹⁴ Since it is “always

to vision” (412). Since it is assumed that with vision comes absolute presence, “we become convinced that in the face-to-face immediacy of speech, but not in writing, the ideal projected by our visual metaphysics—the ideal of a full presence of meaning—is actually possible” (412). What is important to keep in mind is that, in the Western tradition, the voice, vision, and touch are all idealized through their association with absolute presence.

¹⁴ Since these structural oppositions affect one another, I would briefly like to consider the distinction that the Western metaphysical tradition makes between the human and the animal. What has been referred to as the animal question, a question that Derrida takes up in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008). In this text, Derrida notes that the animal is generally associated with the machine, “fixed or stuck in the mechanicity of its programming” (87). That is to say, the Western metaphysical tradition associates animals with technology, unable to create a meaningful response, only able to react. Derrida questions this habit of likening the animal to a machine, calling this association the animal-machine. For Derrida, the animal-machine represents the philosophical tendency to view the animal as an object devoid of any ability to

technical and representative” (*Of Grammatology* 11), writing, in the tradition of Western metaphysics, lacks the idealized interiority associated with speech. As a result, writing falls outside of the self-presence of the subject that the mind is supposedly able to achieve in its identity with the idealized, interior, voice (12). In this tradition, blindness, like writing, is relegated as other, denied the possibility of presence. This fundamental dualism undergirds the entire Western tradition of metaphysics. Derrida reads the tradition in ways that reveal its violent hierarchies, and at the same time, his work points to the limits of these traditional binaries, suggesting that these limits are precisely what open the tradition to its excluded others. For example, his readings problematize the assumption that the idealized interior voice, the “hearing-oneself-speak” (*s’entendre parler*), yields any pure self-presence. For Derrida, the so-called “mind” cannot be called upon to present itself with any pure immediacy. Rather, as Freud had it, writing, the inscribed trace, is what is originary.

respond or question. The characteristics of the animal-machine “bring together in a single system nonresponse, a language that doesn’t respond because it is fixed or stuck in the mechanicity of its programming, and finally lack, defect, deficit, or deprivation” (87). Inherent in the animal-machine are the Cartesian binaries mind/body, inside/outside, internal/external and thus, human/animal. In *The Animal*, Derrida aims to demonstrate how philosophers such as Kant, Heidegger, Levinas and Lacan think, like Descartes, “that in contrast to us humans [. . .] the animal neither speaks nor responds, that its capacity to produce signs is foreign to language and limited or fixed by a program” (89), criticizing how none of these thinkers has taken into account the difference *between* animals (89). “The animal remains for Levinas,” Derrida notes, “what it will have been for the whole Cartesian-type tradition: a machine that doesn’t speak, that doesn’t have access to sense, that can at best imitate ‘signifiers without a signified’” (117). Derrida demonstrates this with an example from *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice claims that it is impossible to hold a conversation with kittens since, “whatever you say to them, they *always* purr” (8, Derrida quoting Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, Carroll’s emphasis). The idea here is that animals cannot form a response based on what is said to them, but can only react. Not only does this metaphor of the machine render animals only capable of an automatic reaction, it also conjures up the image of an object completely devoid of emotion or suffering. Notably, Carroll also has Alice pose the question: “But how *can* you talk with a person if they *always* say the same thing?” (8). The insinuation being that they *don’t* always say the same thing. Here, Carroll makes a clear Cartesian distinction between the human and the animal.

In “Structure, Sign, and Play,” Derrida “deconstructs” the idea of the centre that structuralism takes to be inherent to every philosophical system. He explains how the centre of a structure cannot be thought of as a fixed point. Rather, it must be thought of as simultaneously within the structure *and* outside of it since, by its very nature as the ultimate referent in the structure, it cannot be exchanged with any of the structure’s other elements (279). The centre is characterized by its supplementarity. That is, it is perpetually engaged in a play of substitutions. According to Derrida, “[o]ne cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence—this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*” (289). As is the case with the trace or the trait, the centre becomes constituted by its absence, by its opening to difference. This play of the supplement disrupts presence since the centre can never be grasped, or localized. As Derrida describes it, “[t]he presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always the play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of as in play before the alternative of presence and absence” (292). Derrida challenges assumptions of the possibility of immediacy since pure self-proximity is rendered impossible by the play of the supplement (see 292). Going back to the trait from *Memoirs of the Blind*, the trait, which constitutes the structure of every graphic act, is caught up in this supplemental chain of significations. This supplemental chain is critical for my thesis since the constant deferral of the trait that makes up the chain is not only not *yet* visible, but it occurs outside the realm of specular objectivity (see 45). It is always already proceeding blind.

Derrida's challenge to the notion of self-presence, self-proximity, or immediacy has

far reaching implications for the hierarchical binaries that undergird the phonocentric tradition—mind/body, but more importantly for me here: abled/disabled, vision/blindness. Calling the notion of pure self-presence into question, suggesting “that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play” (“Structure, Sign, and Play” 280), Derrida problematizes the very binary between mind and body that is the foundation of the Western tradition. This is important for my thesis since by problematizing this fundamental binary, Derrida challenges the distinction made between abled and disabled, whereby the human can no longer be conceived of as originally present and constituted by integrality. Rather, writing in response to this hierarchical division between intelligibility and sensibility, Derrida considers ways that such binaries might open themselves to difference. In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida demonstrates this opening by reading the Louvre paintings, paintings which are characteristic of the metaphysics of sight, in a way that opens them to this condition of blindness.

Association of Sight and Knowledge in the Western tradition

Derrida notes that the Western metaphysical tradition venerates the voice and touch—both as idealized. However, as I noted in the previous section, the idealising of voice and touch is inseparable from the idealising of sight. Derrida characterizes this tradition by its idealization of sight since, just as an association is made between voice and touch and the possibility of knowing the self through the fully interiorized, rational mind, it assumes a “natural” relationship between seeing and knowing (perception) (*Memoirs* 12). This

assumption is embedded in metaphysical discourse. Working under this assumption, metaphors of sight and vision used to demonstrate knowledge predominate in Western languages.¹⁵ The idealization of visual perception, an idealized perception that privileges rationality and assumes the possibility of calling up the image in, what Derrida has referred to as, complete immediacy, that is constitutive of the Western tradition causes him to characterize the tradition as a metaphysics of “seeing.” What is at stake, then, in the Western tradition, is the conflation of “sight” with “perception,” a perception associated with rationality. In other words, the tradition assumes that through an idealized vision, a vision that does not include a body, it is possible to capture an image or thought in pure immediacy. This vision is one where the body is not at issue since it is aligned with rationality, or the “mind” in opposition to the body. This disembodied vision is hegemonic insofar as the effort it makes to capture is an inherently violent attempt to possess the other.¹⁶ Violent since the singularity of this vision results in the death of the other, which is

¹⁵ In *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay introduces his study of twentieth-century French thought’s “profound suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era” (14) by examining the numerous examples in Western languages of visual metaphors used to demonstrate knowing and understanding (1-2). However, Jay’s thesis disagrees with Derrida inasmuch as Jay argues that deconstruction’s treatment of the visual, as I noted in note three, can at times be characterized as “antivisual” (498). That is to say, he suggests that deconstruction privileges blindness over vision. Nevertheless, Jay notes that “it would be imprecise to call the suspicious approach Derrida does take to the primacy of vision in Western culture a straightforward ‘critique’ of ocularcentrism” (496) since, for Derrida, “the hypertrophy of something designated vision per se could not be subjected to a critique, even if deconstruction permitted such an approach” (497). That being said, I do not address Jay’s work in my thesis primarily because of his misreading of Derrida, which I outlined in note three.

¹⁶ Levin refers to the vision of the Western metaphysical tradition as hegemonic in “Keeping Foucault and Derrida in Sight.” Here, he gives an overview of Foucault’s and Derrida’s critiques of this hegemonic vision. According to Levin, their subversive use of vision, a vision characterized by a necessary blindness, in order to critique the disembodied vision of the Western tradition might be called “postmetaphysical vision” (398). For Levin, “Derrida demonstrates a postmetaphysical vision by inscribing and encrypting his glances and gazes

subsumed under the reign of the post-Cartesian hierarchy. That is to say, relegating the other to the disadvantaged side of the binary has catastrophic effects for the other—effects that have contributed to ideologies such as racism and ableism, to name only two. This has critical implications for people with disabilities since they are rendered unwhole or deficient in the metaphysics of seeing, cut off from knowledge and identity. Moreover, since this metaphysics of seeing disembodies the sense of sight and aligns it with pure rationality, it conceives of blindness, on the other hand, as pure embodiment, as ontologically deficient. This idealized vision is presumed to be completely trustworthy, in the sense that what is captured by the gaze is taken for granted as fully present and knowable. Since sight assumes absolute knowledge, there is no room for scepticism or any need for belief. Derrida addresses this in the closing lines of *Memoirs of the Blind*—one voice of the polylogue asks “Tears that see... Do you believe?” To which Derrida responds, “In don’t know, one has to believe...” (129). In her article, “Hard, Dry Eyes and Eyes That Weep: Vision and Ethics in Levinas and Derrida” (2006), Chloé Taylor appeals to this suspension of knowledge that characterizes the eyes of the blind, noting that both Derrida and Cixous characterize the blindman’s step as hesitant and portray “the seeing person [as] too sure, too certain, or too knowing, imposing his vision on the world” (para. 25). This hesitation that comes with myopia or blindness, for Derrida and Cixous, does not suggest a flaw—this suspension of knowledge does not suggest a rational disturbance or loss of identity. Rather, as Taylor notes, Derrida and Cixous relate sight “to an all too certain step, to an irresponsible knowing” (para. 25).

As Derrida reads them, the works of art in the Louvre exhibition reinforce these

within the movement of *écriture*, subverting the metaphysical eye in the articulations of his texts” (427).

metaphysical assumptions of the Western tradition. In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida reads blindness against this particular tenet of metaphysics but he also reads these works in such a way that opens them to a condition of blindness, dismantling the edifice of this metaphysics of sight. That is, Derrida reads these works of art in such a way that opens them to the excluded other—blindness—that haunts them. As a result of this, reading these paintings uncovers ways in which the works open the tradition to a blindness that all humans share and that is inherent in the graphic act. Again, this is significant for my thesis since it challenges the assumption that embodied life emerges from some absolute presence.

The Truth of the Eyes—Weeping

At the end of *Memoirs of the Blind* Derrida suggests that the eye is not necessarily an organ of sight or perception. Rather, that the work of the human eye is not to see but to weep. As he describes it:

Now if tears *come to the eyes*, if they *well up in them*, and if they can also veil sight, perhaps they reveal, in the very course of this experience, in this coursing of water, an essence of the eye, of man's eye, in any case, the eye understood in the anthropo-theological space of the sacred allegory. *Deep down, deep down inside, the eye would be destined not to see but to weep* [my emphasis]. For at the very moment they veil sight, tears would unveil what is proper to the eye. And what they cause to surge up out of forgetfulness, there where the gaze or look looks after it, keeps it in reserve, would be nothing less than *alētheia*, the *truth* of the eyes, whose ultimate destination they would thereby reveal: to have imploration rather than vision in sight, to address prayer, love, joy, or sadness rather than a look or gaze. Even before it illuminates, revelation is the moment of the “tears of joy.” (126)

Recognizing that the work of art is a ruin, the spectator weeps. Tears veil the eyes, blinding them, but by doing so “[reveal] the very truth of the eyes” (126). That is to say, the very truth of the human eye is not its ability to see, but to weep. Derrida appeals to the poet,

Andrew Marvell who holds that, only by losing his sight “does man begin to *think* the eyes” (128). Only when the eye is veiled by tears are we able to surrender our preoccupation with pure visual perception and “see” what is proper to the eye. With this, the eyes “[catch] a glimpse of the difference” between seeing and weeping, and “keeps it, looks after it in memory—and this is the veil of tears—until finally, and from or with the ‘same eyes,’ the tears see” (128). Derrida emphasizes that, while “two eyes can always become dissociated from the point of view of the view, of sight,” it is the “‘whole eye,’ the whole of the eye, that weeps” (127). It is impossible to weep with only one eye, while the other stays dry. Furthermore, as Taylor notes, “[b]ecause we cry at what we see, and cry involuntarily, crying is an instance of sight which is passive, a response to the object of the gaze acting upon the eyes, an example of another way of seeing other than that which has dominated Western metaphysics” (para. 29).

Derrida’s work in *Memoirs of the Blind* does not serve to denigrate sight in favour of blindness, implementing yet another problematic opposition. He writes, “[t]he blindness that opens the eye is not the one that darkens vision” (126-27). Rather, “[t]he revelatory or apocalyptic blindness, the blindness that reveals the very truth of the eyes, would be the gaze veiled by tears. It neither sees nor does not see: it is indifferent to its blurred vision. It implores: first of all in order to know from where these tears stream down and from whose eyes they come to well up” (126-27). Lawlor writes that Derrida’s work in *Memoirs of the Blind* “consists in overturning the intuitive and immediate presence of vision into a sight veiled with tears” (41). This essence of the eye comes forth at the moment of the self-portrait.

By reconsidering the very truth of the eyes in *Memoirs of the Blind* Derrida's work points to the limitations of conceptions of blindness that in the Western tradition serve to denigrate it. Indeed, the future is bleak for a draftsman who desperately attempts to hold onto his sight. Derrida writes, "the draftsman who trusts in sight, in present sight, who fears the suspension of visual perception, who does not want to be done with mourning it, who does not want to let it go, this draftsman begins to go blind simply through the fear of losing his sight" (47-48). Rather than stigmatizing blindness as a violation of nature, Derrida's reading of the Louvre exhibition opens sight to a certain blindness. By complicating the long-standing pedigree of strict binaries that we have inherited from Western metaphysics, Derrida points to a condition of blindness that all humans have in common. In this way, not only does Derrida's work in *Memoirs of the Blind* dismantle the structural opposition between vision and blindness, he also suggests that the disabled body is not a natural deviation from the normal body, but paradigmatic of the human itself. Derrida's overturning of this binary has important social, political, and ethical significance since, by challenging the discursive construction of "disability" and "blindness," his work points to new, non-dualist ways of thinking about disability in general, and blindness in particular. As I hope I have demonstrated, Derrida's readings of these paintings of blindness has them opening themselves to the very condition of blindness that haunts vision, problematizing the notion of pure immediacy that comes with a privileging of visual perception.

Chapter 3

David Wills: The Originary Prosthetization of the Human

Thus it is the otherness that the body must carry in order to move that begins—and a first-person adjective is now ready to bear it—this our prosthesis.

- David Wills, *Prosthesis*

According to David Wills, *Prosthesis* embarks “upon the production of its own literary artifact in the form of a fragmentary and episodic story of a father’s wooden leg” (11). In telling this story, Wills explores the meaning of terms such as “the natural,” “the body,” and “the artificial” and how we have come to understand them. Taking as his starting point a memory from his childhood, in which he watches his father sway back and forth at the sink, attempting to ease the pain that results from putting pressure on his wooden leg, Wills connects his father’s prosthesis to a line from Virgil (*quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum* or “the hoof strikes the dusty plain in a four-footed rhythm”), and suggests that his use of “prosthesis” is twofold. On the one hand, the term refers to the story of a “prosthesis,” a wooden leg. On the other hand, as the book title suggests, the term refers to the writing, the book that Wills is producing. As such, the word “prosthesis” “will no longer be able to stand alone, confident in its diacritical difference, as the title of a book,” instead becoming “the awkward conjunction of two discourses” (11). According to Wills, the difference between “prosthesis” (a wooden leg) and “*Prosthesis*” (the writing) is the difference at stake for him, since “the writing of *Prosthesis* is divided within and even against itself not just by virtue of a decision concerning strategy but by the very fact of a father’s prosthesis” (10-11). The conjunction between these two discourses must be read

every time one reads “prosthesis.”

Where Derrida proposes a universal condition of blindness, Wills suggests in *Prosthesis* that the human is constituted by a primordial prosthetic condition. Consequently, his work in the text complicates the traditional metaphysical binary between mind and body by calling into question the integrality of the human, or the animate. For Wills, prosthesis occurs as “a rapid transfer” into otherness, an otherness which the body must bear (12-13). He challenges the notion of the self-referential “I” by holding that the “I” should always, necessarily be read as prosthetic (19). Contesting notions of humans’ originary integrality, Wills conceives of the human as constituted by its own prosthetic origins. For Wills, this prosthesis is an articulation of difference that was there at the beginning of what we call “human” (31). He argues that humans have turned away from (almost literally) the originary prosthetic origins that constitute them. Although he does not address issues of sight and blindness in great depth, I argue that his work in *Prosthesis* has great significance for a thinking of blindness since by reconceiving “prosthesis,” Wills’ work suggests that “blindness” as a prosthetic state, is universal. With this, Wills subverts the dualist construction of vision/blindness.

As a way of introducing some of the key motifs in Wills’ work, I open this chapter by addressing his theorization of the structural opposition between the animate and inanimate, first, by exploring how humans distinguish themselves as animate beings, and second, by exploring the spectre of inanimation that haunts us. Doing so, I point to ways that the division between the animate and inanimate affects the discursive construction of “disability,” particularly “vision” and “blindness.” From here, I move to a discussion of this opposition in relation to the structure of prosthesis—a structure that is inherent in every

articulation, including the articulation of the trace—and to Wills’ conception of the originary prosthetization of the human being, a prosthetization that suggests that the human is originarily deficient, fragmented, disabled.

Characterization of the Animate

A critical element of Wills’ work is his destabilization of the animate/inanimate binary, the structural opposition that pits the inanimacy or mechanicity of the technological against animate beings, *technē* against *bios*. This binary is central to the way humans define that which is outside of themselves. The human distinguishes himself as animate because of their access to rationality. By privileging himself based on his ability to have rational thought, technology, as other, is relegated to the disadvantaged side of the binary.¹⁷ That is, technology is set apart from animate life as a mere thing, inert object, machine. Technology is characterized by its inability to create a meaningful response since it is “fixed or stuck in the mechanicity of its programming” (Derrida, *The Animal* 87). By pushing mechanicity outside of the self, humans privilege the pure interiority of the mind. In doing so, they attempt to create themselves as self-enclosed, self-referential beings. That is, by pushing mechanicity outside of the self, humans define themselves as animate by their ability to reason or to refer to themselves, separating themselves from whatever inanimate prostheses, or technological prostheses, lie outside of themselves.

¹⁷ I want to make a brief note about my use of gendered language. It is deliberate since the tradition that privileges the human over the machine (or the inanimate, the disabled), is the same tradition that privileges men over women. When I refer to the “human” as the Western metaphysical tradition conceives of it, I refer to it as male in order to point to the exclusionary nature of this tradition. I hope that in demonstrating how my selected critical thinkers problematize this limited conceptualization of “human,” I also point to the ways that they challenge the tradition’s other fundamental binaries, such as male/female.

By calling attention to this opposition, Wills does not intend “to replace the organic with the mechanical,” but rather argues “against any rigorous purity of either” (*Dorsality* 5-6). In his theorization of the technological Wills urges his readers to “think technology beyond the confines of a traditional concept of the human-mechanical relation” (4). Rather, “[w]e should think of a technology that grows, and of the *bios* in general as following the technological turn” (4). In *Dorsality: Thinking Back Through Technology and Politics* (2008), Wills contends that “any rupture within the plenitude of a self-enclosed intact human identity opens the space of the technological or even the inanimate, and that such a rupture is in evidence well before or behind where common sense or tradition would locate it, back in the beginning that [he calls] the dorsal” (105). Wills’ primary concern in *Dorsality* is what he calls the “technological turn.” “What mobilizes itself in the technological turn,” as Wills conceives of it, “is a function of something that *cannot but occur*, has already occurred, occurs automatically, is itself already in the service of the machine” (3, my emphasis). Here, Wills points to an originary mechanization, a “turn into technology that was always there” (3). This “there” that Wills points to is the human itself. He holds that the moment when humans first stood upright, distinguishing themselves from the animal, marks “a fundamental realignment of the human in its relation to technology” (8), indicating a significant change in the way humans “conceive of and determine what is outside” of themselves (17). Staggering forward on two feet, according to Wills, the upright gait is necessarily prosthetic in the sense that with each step the human is “correcting its bearing, limping from one foot to the other” (4). Furthermore, and this is where the crux of Wills’ argument comes in, this technological turn is a departure, a deviation, or a divergence into difference and it is always necessarily “a turning to the

back” (4). With each step, the human is perpetually in a motion towards the back. In this way, the technological necessarily comes to the human from behind, back where Wills calls the dorsal. A technology that comes from or originates behind “would therefore mean turning to see the technology of the human itself, inside itself, if you wish, in any case inaccessible or invisible from the perspective of an integral human gathered within its neatly prescribed limits of borders and gazing ahead into a controlled exteriority of the artifact” (7). Preoccupied with this front-facing perspective, this technology is not part of the human self-image.

By challenging the idea that the animate, the human, becomes technological by “entering into a prosthetic articulation with whatever it fashions outside of its own body” (*Dorsality* 4), Wills opens up “human” to questions of difference. He holds that,

[a]lthough it is the limb that will determine the prospect of a relation to a tool, to what we call artifice in general, and so inaugurate and underwrite a conception of a human or an animate that becomes technologized by entering into a prosthetic articulation with whatever it fashions outside its own body, one might as well argue that the animate first articulates and so becomes technological in the self-division of a cell, in the self-generation of an amoeba. (4)

Critical here is that Wills does not conceive of prosthesis as something that necessarily exists outside of the human. Rather, Wills’ “prosthesis” complicates the bifurcation between inside and outside, as does his argument for an inanimacy that exists at the beginning of “human.”

Challenging the animate/inanimate binary, Wills argues that “[a] technology of the human itself, a technology that defines and so produces the human, cannot be part of the human self-image; it comes at the human from behind, is already at its back. Or indeed, *in its back*” (*Dorsality* 7). The spine figures prominently in Wills’ theorization of the technology of the human since he holds that “[t]he figure or pose of our fundamental

technological articulation and actualization—the point at which that emerges into visibility—is the upright stance,” or the moment when the human first unfolds its spine (8). Wills locates the mechanicity of technology in the step humans first took with two feet and describes walking as a correction of one’s bearings or a “limping from one foot to the other” (4). For Wills, this step is always, in a way, a turn to the back, a turn that represents a “divergence into difference” (4). That is:

the turn is the deviation from itself by means of which the human, in being or ‘moving’ simply human, is understood to become technological. And such a turn begins as soon as there is understood to be any human. The human is, from the point of view of this turn, understood to become technological as soon as it becomes human, to be always already turning that way. (4)

Wills holds that “[t]he dorsal turn involves, finally, a turning back to language as primary technological system” and argues that “one must seek to technologize language, or forms of discourse themselves” (15). The connection, for Wills, between language and the body is apparent here, further evident in the dual reading of “prosthesis” I noted at the beginning of the chapter. Language and the body are both prosthetic, pointing towards a breakdown in the boundary between the animate and inanimate, natural and artificial. This is a point of obvious significance for a thinking that links disability to a prosthetic aid: blindness, for example, to a white cane, a supplement that sets the disabled apart, by virtue of their reliance on the inanimate. I turn to this in more detail in the pages that follow. In the meantime, I address this inanimation that haunts humans from behind.

The Spectre of Inanimation

Reading Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Wills identifies the moment of the upright stance as the moment when humans first propelled mechanicity outside of

themselves. For Freud, the moment when the human assumed the upright gait has major consequences for humans' relation to civilization. In a discussion of how human sexuality transformed from a primarily olfactory sexuality to a visual one, Freud identifies the assumption of the upright posture as an "organic repression" (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 36n1). That is to say, sexual excitation was no longer obtained by primarily olfactory stimuli, the smell of menstrual blood. Rather, the privileging of the sense of smell was repressed in favour of visual stimuli. Freud writes: "The fateful process of civilization would thus have set in with man's adoption of an erect posture" (36n1). Reading Freud, Wills holds that with the upright stance, the senses of smell and hearing are downgraded in favour of a "frontal visual perspective" (*Dorsality* 8-9).¹⁸ Wills continues, "[i]t is in the human back as the spinal—or can we already say dorsal?—turn or adjustment, the primary or primal vertebral articulation that frees the hands to pick up stones and fashion tools, that redistributes the weight of the head and jaw to allow the brain to develop and the tongue to speak" (9). It is at this very moment, then, that the human receives "a definition from a technologization of the body, in a becoming-prosthesis" (9). With this new privileging of sight, those without access to visual perception—the perception that is presumed to be the "normal" or "natural" way of accessing the world—are regarded as deficient, "abnormal." Furthermore, those who rely primarily on the other senses—senses deemed primitive or animalistic compared to sight—are associated with lesser beings, animals, which humans distinguish themselves from through this new hierarchy of the senses. As a result of the strict opposition (animate/inanimate, human/animal, human/machine) that this moment

¹⁸ In *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace* (2005) Robert Jütte explains how this classical hierarchy of the senses goes back to Aristotle, who arranged the senses with sight in the privileged position followed by hearing, smell, taste, and then touch (61).

inaugurates, those with visual impairments fall on the disadvantaged side of this binary.

This moment becomes one of inanimation since it marks the “rupture of the integral subject” (*Dorsality* 239). Wills gives to this rupture “the name of technology,” “precisely because, as [he has] consistently maintained, it [technology] functions within the same prosthetizing structure that defines and inhabits the body and determines the relations of human to other, to other humans, to other animals, and to the inanimate” (239). This inanimation, that Wills argues cannot be separated out from the human, haunts us from behind, almost literally, since it was with the unfolding of the spine that humans first separated themselves from mechanicity. Characterizing the machine (and the animal) by its lack of autonomy, by its autonomism that comes with chronic repetition (“fixed or stuck in the mechanicity of its programming” [Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* 87]), and as an object devoid of rational thought, the human distinguishes itself as governed by the intelligible as opposed to the sensible. That is to say, the human separates itself from the various “others” that inhabit the disadvantaged side of the traditional Cartesian binary—including disability and blindness.

Animation is a “surprise or accident that appears, at least, to come from behind, from out of range or outside the field of vision, challenging that technocratic faith or confidence and calling into question its control” (*Dorsality* 7). Since it comes “from another point of view, from outside the field of visual possibility” (7), mechanicity eludes the front-facing perception privileged in the Western tradition.¹⁹ Everything that the human

¹⁹ As Walter Benjamin argues in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” the Western tradition privileges the front-facing perception associated with progress. Benjamin critiques Historicism, the tradition that attempts to establish a causal connection between various moments in history (263). Finding this tendency to view history as a chain of selected events problematic, Benjamin is interested in a new way of thinking about history that looks at what has been discounted. As

produces, including technologies of the hand and language, is “presumed to occur within that frontal visual perspective of the knowable” (9). As a result, what lies outside of this *visual* perspective—the other, the unknowable, the disabled—is forgotten, abandoned or, perhaps, repressed. Furthermore, “the upright stance definitely inaugurates a radically new relation of human to technological, and a radically new sense of how we conceive of and determine what is outside us in general and behind us in particular, a new definition of dorsal” (17). It is at this point that the technological or the inanimate is pushed outside and behind the human—the human as animate, idealized, integral, “natural,” and “normal.”

Wills’ theorization of prosthesis and the inanimate suggests how the dorsal might serve as a basis for ethics. He argues that dorsality could serve as “an ethics that takes account of the machine [the prosthetic, the inanimate, the other] in the human, that deals with the form of unassimilable *inanimation* that inhabits the back of the human, an unassimilable otherness that participates in its functioning and so precisely yet paradoxically prevents its acting and responding from the presumption of what can be foreseen” (*Dorsality* 12, italics in original). With the upright stance, the human attempted to violently maintain its status as animate and distinguish itself from the inanimate. Wills challenges these attempts and contends that there is an inanimation inhabiting our backs. By opening the animate to its inanimate other, Wills points to a non-dualist ethics of the dorsal. As a result, the very status of “human” is brought to question. Challenging the status of “human” has far reaching effects, including, for my purposes here, how we conceive of “sight” and “blindness.” That is to say, Wills conceives of the human,

opposed to thinking of history linearly, Benjamin conceives of history as a constellation, where events in history are connected to each other through time and space—almost simultaneously (263). By doing so, Benjamin challenges his readers to avoid being preoccupied with progress. Rather, he calls them to pay more attention to the past.

constituted by an originary prosthesis, as nonintegral and unable to ever achieve any sort of presence or wholeness. By overturning the binary between the animate and inanimate, Wills thwarts human's attempts to align themselves with pure rationality and to distinguish themselves as "natural" and "normal." Rather, Wills' work points to the technological—the inanimate, mechanical, prosthetic, the other—that is always already a part of the human.

Wills suggests that there is an originary technology in the back—back behind the human but also *in* its back—that renders the human more of a "prosthetic human" (*Dorsality* 12). This technology is in the back inasmuch as what is behind the human points to the beginning of what might be called human. As well, suggesting that inanimation inhabits our backs gestures towards what is out of view of sight, coming "from outside the field of visual possibility" (7). Again, Wills challenges the assumption that visual perception—a perception that incorporates only what is in front of the human—is ever whole. Rather, for Wills, what constitutes the human is something that is necessarily not seen—an originary blindness that haunts the human from behind. The ultimate ethical challenge, according to Wills, is to consider "a type of *inanimation*—not simply inert matter—before or behind the human" (62). Doing so forces us "to realize that we are not completely human and can never become so" (62).²⁰ By arguing that inanimation cannot be

²⁰ Another scholar who works on the hybridity of human technology is Donna J. Haraway. However, Haraway's methods and conclusions significantly differ from Wills'. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), Haraway locates the cyborg figure as originating after the Second World War, describing them as a hybrid of organism and machine. She holds that they are "made of, first, ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen 'high-technological' guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlled labouring, desiring, and reproducing systems" and second, "machines in their guise, also, as communications systems, texts, and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses" (1). This book "interrogates the multi-faceted biopolitical, biotechnological, and feminist theoretical stories of the situated knowledges by and about these promising and non-innocent monsters" (2). As "boundary creatures," simians, cyborgs, and women, for Haraway, destabilize the

separated out from the animation with which humans align themselves, Wills overturns the traditional binary between intelligibility and sensibility. I address the implications of this dismantling alongside Wills' theorization of prosthesis in the next section.

The Structure of Prosthesis

Wills' theorization of the connection between inanimation and animation is significant for thinking about the trace in that it suggests a connection between the trace and what is artificial. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the trace is constituted by its iterability, challenging our ability to ever really speak of a first time. As Derrida writes, “[e]verything begins with reproduction” (“Freud and the Scene of Writing” 211) since “repetition always already divides the point of departure of the first time” (213). This is not the repetition of sameness associated in the Western tradition with a mechanical glitch, such as the repetition of a syllable by a CD that begins to skip. By opening the human to the technology that constitutes it, Wills' work points to what Derrida suggests is a technicity beyond human control, a mechanicity inherent in the trace and in life. In “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” Derrida holds that “life protects itself by repetition, trace, *différance*” (203).²¹ Critical here is that through repetition, it—life, prosthesis, etc.—“displays its difference, the difference of repetition and the difference of its parts” (Wills, *Prosthesis* 309). Locating an automaticity in the “human,” Wills challenges the autonomy associated

“evolutionary, technological, and biological narratives” that predominate in Western culture (2).

²¹ In *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body* (2004), Elizabeth Wilson notes that *différance* is not just a mechanism of signification, but a “biological mechanism” as well (109n3). That is to say, according to Wilson, “the identity of any biological entity (organism, organ, cell) is to be found in the movement of relationality—between individuals over time, within groups, between organisms and their environment, among body parts, across cell membranes” (109n3). This is significant to think about if we consider embodied life as constituted by *différance*.

with the rationally conceived self.

Important for characterizing the originary prosthetization of the human is the structure of the prosthetic. In a discussion of pain's place as "outside the limit to any semiotics," Wills holds that "every discursive operation borrows the structure of the prosthetic" (*Prosthesis* 31). For Wills, the structure of the prosthetic is the notion of prosthesis as an "articulation of difference, as difference" (31). That is, prosthesis constitutes a spacing into difference, a transfer into otherness (12-13). This question of transfer is significant and I turn to it in the pages that follow. Significant for my purposes here is that the structure of prosthesis, opening into difference, is evident in every articulation, such as the articulation of a limb or of the trace. Additionally, this structure of prosthesis "is there at the beginning" of the human (31). By locating a prosthesis at the beginning of "human," Wills suggests that the human is constituted by this articulation of difference—a difference that opens the human to the deviation or departure that lies at its origin. Constituted by departure or fragmentation, the human is, at its origin, prosthetic, unwhole, disabled.

This question of origin is one I would like to take time to work through since, according to the repetition of the trace, there can never be a single origin, a first instance. In referring to a prosthesis at the origin of "human," Wills insists "on the non-originary status of the body, on the non-integrality of its origin, in order to resist the idea that the originary dissemination of sense might be weakened by the presumption of a corporeal entity (a supposition that subsumes the concept of the individual and the law of the proper name)" (*Prosthesis* 137). Rather, "although there is no decisive moment that inaugurates prosthesis—that is to say that inaugurates its idea and its structure—any given prosthesis

will all the same be marked by the coming down of a decision, the diagnostic sentence a prelude to the surgical falling of the ax” (149). That is to say, at the “origin” of prosthesis is a fundamental absence: “the origin is in this case an absence and a double articulation, a displacement of original plenitude into the kinetics of working parts” (33). The mechanicity inherent in life suggests that the human is always already becoming technological, or prosthetic. For the purposes of my thesis, this suggests that the human is always already fragmenting, disabling.

Prosthesis and Subjectivity—Questions of Transfer

For Wills, “the writing of prosthesis, [. . .] is inevitably caught in a complex play of displacements; prosthesis being about nothing if not placement, displacement, replacement, standing, dislodging, substituting, setting, amputating, supplementing” (*Prosthesis* 9). As he demonstrates throughout the text, the idea of space or distance is significant for “prosthesis/*Prosthesis*.” Included here is the significance and effect of transfer. Wills maintains that transfer occurs at the beginning of prosthesis; “[p]rosthesis occurs as a rapid transfer” (12). That is, “it is necessarily a transfer into otherness, articulated through the radical alterity of ablation as loss of integrity” (13). In this way, the structure of prosthesis is not only about space, but also about movement. This movement and spacing is similar to the deferral that Derrida evokes in his writing on the supplement and *différance*. Prosthesis is always about an opening to or a movement into difference. In “RE: Mourning” (1998), Wills describes the “phenomena” of prosthesis as “the effect of a passage from one state to the other [. . .] from the natural to the artificial, and back again.” This structure of prosthesis, as a relation to otherness, is evident in every “lapse,” departure, or

“materializing” of the self-present “I,” therefore, in every articulation. That is, “any articulation is by definition a discontinuity or rupture that involves a relation with difference or otherness” (Wills, “Preambles” 40). According to Wills, the body must bear this passage into otherness (*Prosthesis* 13). Prosthesis “reads that body as nothing so much as articulation itself, as a result of which prosthesis does not come after the body but defines the body itself” (“Preambles” 40). This is the structure of prosthesis that is evident in every articulation. This includes the articulation that inaugurates the technological in the human. Here Wills points to a primordial prosthesis that I address in the pages that follow—and that I relate to blindness since the structure of prosthesis thwarts any possibility of pure self-presence. By challenging this possibility—a possibility associated with visual perception—Wills problematizes associations between blindness and rational obfuscation.

In the meantime, I turn my attention to Wills’ final chapter of *Prosthesis*, in which he takes up the first section of Derrida’s *The Post Card*, “Envois,” in order to examine more closely the importance of transfer—translation and transliteration—for his theory of prosthesis. More specifically, he questions how, as a translator of Derrida, he is to translate a mark such as “(,” more specifically an open “(” that is missing its mate (288). In the case of this mark, Wills notes that there is “no way of telling what precise transfer has occurred to have it go from one text to the other, to a third text, no way of telling how to stop its migration, to arrest its movement however halting that movement might be” (288). Furthermore, while translating “Envois,” Wills comes across this open parenthesis, where no closing parenthesis is to be found, and is unsure how to translate this absence. He meditates on the significance of this slip, error, or *lapsus* (290), stating that, “[l]anguage

always occurs within the structure of the *lapsus* [or the slip, the error, or ‘prosthesis’]. But this one-legged propulsion into *lapsus* and translation is also a skate into what is here called prosthesis, the confusion of animate with inanimate, of the natural with the artificial; and the confusion of the priorities that are supposed to regulate those differences” (300). In a moment of confusion regarding translation, Wills points to the structure of prosthesis, which is the structure of the *lapsus*. This structure points to a blurring of the boundary between the animate and the inanimate, the natural and the artificial. In this discussion of prosthesis, space, and questions of transfer, Wills writes that, “[p]rosthesis is about nothing if it is not about measuring distance—that of the necessary separation and unavoidable complication between animate and inanimate form, between natural and artificial; that between types of writing, between memory and art criticism—about the necessity for and impossibility of precision in these relations. It is about close and distant connections of close and distant relatives” (40). In this way, prosthesis constitutes a transfer/translation as a spacing of/into difference—a transfer into otherness (see 12-13). This transfer into otherness is significant for me here since this spacing into difference opens up traditional metaphysical binaries to the other that haunts them.

Connecting prosthesis to ideas of transfer or spacing has significant implications for questions of subjectivity; a question that is a point of contention in disability studies. For Wills, the self-referential “I,” “the oft-repeated ‘I’ should always be read as a prosthetic ‘I’, one forced into a combination of natural and unnatural relations, with a father’s leg, wooden or otherwise, or with a text” (*Prosthesis* 19). Conceiving of the “I” as prosthetic, it is “[o]nly ever therefore a relation, in a number of senses of the word” (19). Consequently, every “I” is related to the event of prosthesis inasmuch as it can never stand alone. It is

only ever a relation (19). In this way, every “I” must be read as an “I” caught up in a never-ending play of departures. Wills’ redefinition of the “I” jeopardizes the auto-affective “I” of the Western tradition—the interiorized “I” of the self. This reconception of the “I” calls into question the Western tradition’s assumption of the possibility of being fully present in the interiority of the mind. As a combination of relations, the “I” must be thought of in three ways. Wills explains,

[i]n the sense, first of all, explained earlier, whereby all *relations* are articulated through the body, literally “carried back” by or through the body; the body carrying its otherness even as it begins to move. In the second sense of whatever takes me back or attaches me to a memory of, an acquaintance with, or a dependence on, a text of my father. In the third sense of a recounting, a retelling, a transfer of textual data to a third party who is a reader, but who, in a strange type of circularity, is in the place of my father to the extent that whatever I write here I write to him. (19)

Furthermore, for Wills, there is “no ‘I’ that is not related to an event of prosthesis, to an event of writing” (*Prosthesis* 19). Wills suggests that writing, or any other graphing, itself is prosthetic (see 30). In this way, *Prosthesis* becomes, itself, a prosthesis (11). He uses word processing as an example, holding that it is prosthetic in the sense that it supplements writing by acting as an extension of the hand and as such it replaces the hand. “Language inaugurates a structure of the prosthetic,” he writes, “when the first word projects itself from the body into materiality, or vice versa; by being always already translation, constituting itself as otherness, articulation of the otherness that constitutes it, language is prosthesis. Every utterance is as if spoken from a skateboard, written on crutches, relying on the prosthetic supplement” (300). Additionally, for Wills, “[w]hether it be a writing that replaces a defective, truncated, or lost memory, the flesh made word, or a function of a body at work with a computer. One cannot simply write *about* prosthesis when one is automatically, just by virtue of writing, writing prosthesis, entering into

prosthetic relations, being prosthetic” (30). Here, Wills calls attention to the prosthesis inherent in the graphic act. He continues,

to the extent that prosthesis seeks to call into question the terms of its own definition and the system of priorities that underwrites that definition, it of course alludes to the Derridean logic of differance [sic], of the supplement and of the divided signature, with the result that what I have just called a possibility—the possibility that a text might *be* a prosthesis—must be considered a necessary condition for the constitution of any text whatsoever. The text is structurally prosthetic, like any writing necessarily inscribed within its own drift and within a certain artificiality. (135)

That is to say, every graphic mark is constituted by a particular prosthesis. It is structurally prosthetic in the sense that it constitutes an articulation of difference. Also, for Wills, “prosthesis is marked by the plurality of its subjects—father, son, leg, text—and by an uncertainty regarding their order and priority” (155). By reconceiving the “I” as a prosthetic “I,” an “I” marked by a plurality, Wills challenges how we think “human.” This bears on questions of disability since, by questioning the assumption that one can be fully present to the self through the self-present “I,” Wills suggests that disability is not a deviation from some “natural” presence since embodied life, for Wills, does not emerge from absolute presence, nor does it ever achieve it with the structure of prosthesis.

The Originary Prosthetization of the Human

Critical for my purposes here, Wills asserts that the prosthetic is the “paradigm for the body itself.” Like Derrida’s universal condition of blindness, Wills conceives of the prosthetic as a condition which *every* body must bear. He challenges notions of the originary integrality of the body when he states that “the body to be found at the scene of prosthesis is deficient, less than whole [i.e. disabled], and has always been so,” arguing that “language’s first reference is made to a body, a non-originary and divided body” (*Prosthesis* 137). By

associating the human with prosthesis, Wills brings to the fore the non-integrality, the deficiency, or the disability of “human” and the human body. That is to say, *every* body is rendered prosthetic or disabled. As well, he contends that prosthesis is an articulation of difference that was there at the beginning (31), has always been there—in writing and in the body. He articulates this well in “Preambles: Disability as Prosthesis” (2001), stating:

disability goes beyond even the idea of the mutant to open the structure of the non-human, the inanimate, the automatic, the technological. Within those conceptions the disabled remain irredeemable to the human. On the other hand, in taking the logic of such reductivism to its outer limit, disability appears not as the end of the human, there where it meets its technological other, but as the beginning of a human revealed as *originarily and irredeemably prosthetic*. (45, my emphasis)

“By means of prosthesis,” Wills writes, “the relation to the other becomes precisely and necessarily a relation to otherness, the otherness, for example, of artificiality attached to or found within the natural” (*Prosthesis* 44). Likewise, “according to prosthesis, relations in general are governed by difference as radical otherness, and a given prosthesis such as a father’s wooden leg is merely a case of that. Any relation is a relation to difference or otherness, and prosthesis is a name for that” (45). According to Wills,

[prosthesis] cannot be reduced to a matter of having or not having the prosthesis, for prosthesis is in no way reducible to a wooden leg. Instead, prosthesis of necessity prosthetizes whatever it relates to by automatically inscribing its effect of otherness. Quite plainly, once an artificial limb comes to be attached to a human body, then any second, or rather third body that relates to that divided first one necessarily relates to it as difference, even if it be another divided or prosthetic body. (44)

By locating an originary prosthesis in the human, Wills problematizes the distinction humans make between themselves and the inanimate, that is to otherness, to disability. His work also jeopardizes the assumption that this is a *natural* distinction. That is to say, that disability is a “natural” deviation from some originary wholeness. Rather, Wills uncovers an otherness, a prosthesis or disability, back in the beginning of what we call “human.”

In addition to the duality of “prosthesis” noted at the outset of this chapter, there is another duality that is intrinsic in “prosthesis.” As Wills states, “the wooden leg represents the duality of every prosthesis, its search for a way between emulating the human and superseding the human” (*Prosthesis* 26). That is, “however much ‘prosthesis’ refers to an apparatus alone, it cannot fail to imply the idea of the amputation—or of a lack or deficiency—that would have preceded it” (133). In this way, “prosthesis” is always written twice. It is never singular. Necessarily referring to “two contradictory but complementary operations: amputation and addition; and then, of course, the animal and mineral, living or natural and artificial, and so on,” Wills’ conception of prosthesis suggests that “[t]here is nothing that is simply or singularly prosthetic; it has no originary integrality” (133). That is to say, we cannot talk about an originary prosthesis as if it is a single event or occurrence. Prosthesis cannot be thought of in terms of a singularity since it must always be read as double. By calling into question the integrality of prosthesis and denying it any singularity, Wills problematizes the integrality assumed to lie at the origin of “human.” Again, and at the risk of belabouring the point, by challenging this originary integrality, Wills complicates the assumption that disability follows from integrality, or that blindness is a deviation from some idealized sight. Furthermore, according to Wills, “no amputation is performed without the forethought of a workable prosthesis. [. . .] In this respect the prosthetic possibility determines the shape of the human, the artificial determines the form of the natural” (29). Perhaps this is the most helpful example of an originary prosthetization of the human. It is the absence that the prosthesis aims to fill that determines the “human,” indicating that Wills’ “prosthesis” denies the human any pure self-presence and suggesting that “human” is constituted by an originary deficiency.

Discourses of Deficiency: Blindness and Prosthesis

In “Preambles” Wills argues that “[w]hen it comes to disability studies, [. . .] identity is constituted in terms of lack or deficiency; that idea inhabits the very act of naming and again indefinitely problematises its choice of words” (38). As a result of this, prosthesis signals towards this deficiency, marking itself as the substitution for an absence. “Within the organicist conception of the human body,” Wills continues,

disability cannot ever be other than deficiency, incompleteness, inadequacy; terms which, within the metaphysics of presence as transcendent positivity, not only are by definition negative, but, more pertinently, explicitly connote non-integrality. The disabled are thus by definition ‘incapable’ of identity inasmuch as identity refers to an uninterrupted organic sameness, present to itself in its wholeness and singularity. (38)

In this way, blindness is characterized as a prosthetic state, in which, lacking the self-presence associated with vision, the blind person is rendered unwhole, fragmented.

However, as Marquard Smith notes, “[a]gainst the myths of the essentialist and organicist conceptions of the body proper, or proper body, disability studies can present a body that is a structuring principle, a lacuna, and a constituting part of this metaphysics of plenitude, ironically laying bare the deficiencies of this very metaphysics” (“The Uncertainty of Placing” 85). Wills does just this in *Prosthesis* and it has significant implications for a rethinking of blindness.

Refuting these discourses of deficiency, Wills challenges a whole host of binaries that result from Western metaphysics’ traditional separation of mind and body. He writes:

Before any physiology and beyond any psychopathology, the body to be found at the scene of prosthesis is deficient, less than whole, and has always been so. Thus, to the extent that the relation called the prosthetic regulates the operations of sense in general, and to the extent that the body functions in that relation is the reference of first and last resort in the terms that I am about to describe, then the prosthetic

body will not be an exception but the paradigm for the body itself. If you will, it is by means of prosthesis that I wish to insist on the non-originary status of the body, on the nonintegrality of its origin, in order to resist the idea that the originary dissemination of sense might be weakened by the presumption of a corporeal entity (a supposition that subsumes the concept of the individual and the law of the proper name). I would hold on the contrary that it is precisely from the disarticulation of the body that the idea of dissemination derives its force. My hypothesis is thus as follows: language's first reference is made to a body, a non-originary and divided body. (*Prosthesis* 137)

There are two consequences of Wills' refutation of the discourses of deficiency for prosthesis in general. First, Wills' characterization of prosthesis suggests that prosthesis cannot be thought of as simply an addition, a foreign attachment since the organic and the artificial must be thought of as a simultaneous occurrence. Second, Wills' work undermines conceptions of the body as whole, in opposition to the disabled body as fragmentary. Rather, for Wills, the body is always already fragmented.²² Indeed, "[t]here is

²² Marquard Smith also notes these consequences in her article "The Uncertainty of Placing: Prosthetic Bodies, Sculptural Design, and Unhomely Dwelling in Marc Quinn, James Gillingham, and Sigmund Freud" (2002) (86). In this article, Smith brings together Wills' theorization of "prosthesis" and questions of sculptural design, arguing that the prosthetic body "is never not a design issue, a design matter, a matter of sculptural design. If anything, it is always already, perhaps first and foremost, a question of sculptural design" (86). Studying various examples of the prosthetic body, Smith holds that "they testify that the prosthetic body [. . .] is always and already a place of dismantling and assembling as well as one of discord and disquiet" (89). Smith refers to this question of place as "the uncertainty of placing," suggesting that the prosthesis is always simultaneously "in place and out of place" (89). Finally, Smith holds that sculptural design can be invoked in these questions of placing. She examines three case studies to demonstrate her point. Smith engages similar themes in her article, "The Vulnerable Articulate: James Gillingham, Aimee Mullins, and Matthew Barney" (2010), in which she considers how and why "these images [medical, commercial, and avant-garde images of the body of the female amputee] articulate *the subject of prosthetics* in academic discourse with regards to what Vivian Sobchack has called 'a tropological currency for describing a vague and shifting constellation of relationship between bodies, technologies, and subjectivities'" (460, italics in orig.). Smith's interest is in how we might "'turn away' from perverse and fetishistic practices as being exclusively sexual and to turn toward the way in which fetishistic objects [. . .] lead us into a malignant, which is to say enduring investment in things that are not wholly human" (462).

no body that is not also an articulation, and no articulation that does not imply a radical notion of divisibility. In writing prosthesis, one enunciates first of all such ideas of articulation and divisibility, and, conversely, a drift along the process of adjunction, a prosthetic chain, indiscriminately contagion and promiscuity. That is the shifting ground the operation know as prosthesis stands on” (*Prosthesis* 141).

Wills’ critique of discourses of deficiency also has significant implications for a thinking of blindness. Wills does not characterize blindness as a prosthetic state since, rather than conceiving of blindness as a lack or a mark of deficiency, he conceives of “human” as originally deficient. He writes in “Preambles” “that there never was any organically integral subject, never such an entity that was not always already imperfect, mechanical, in relations of dependence, originally disabled or incompetent; what [he], in short, would call prosthetic” (39). Consequently, Wills problematizes the binary that lay at the foundation of traditional conceptions of blindness and disability. That is, he challenges associations between vision and wholeness. In his work in *Dorsality* on Levinas, Wills addresses the issue of blindness and the hand. He notes that according to Levinas, “[t]he hand is by essence groping” (61, quoting Levinas). Following this, Wills questions assumptions of what is knowable. Rather, he holds that “technology as invention retains something of the accident, that however much it is about production and control, about snatching at nature and gaining the upper hand (*emprise*), it arrives through a type of blindness or groping in the dark” (61). Although we try to maintain control over technology (by inanimating it, by pushing it outside of ourselves), it “retains something of the unseeable or unforeseeable other [. . .] it never shows us a face or speaks to us through its eyes, that is because it exists to some extent outside our vision and our grasp” (61). In

this way, Wills challenges the Western tradition's assumptions that it is possible to grasp the essence—or trait, trace, etc.—of anything. Rather, for Wills, there is a part of technology that is lost through a necessary blindness.

By reconceiving “human” as originally deficient, constituted by the structure of the prosthetic, Wills overturns the hierarchical opposition between animation/inanimation, intelligibility/sensibility, and, for my purposes here, vision/blindness and ability/disability. Wills writes, “[p]rosthesis occurs on the border between the living and the lifeless; it represents the monstrosity of interfering with the integrity of the human body, the act of unveiling the unnatural within the natural” (*Prosthesis* 247). Wills’ work points to a necessary prosthesis within “human.” By conceiving of prosthesis as a universal human condition, Wills upends the traditional metaphysical binary between the mind and body and he upends the integral/lacking binary through which disability continues to be theorized. Furthermore, Wills’ thesis challenges assumptions that depict blindness as ontologically deficient: blindness is not conceived of as a lack of integrality or an identity deficiency. By problematizing conceptions of blindness as a prosthetic state, Wills’ work has further effects for thinking about disability more generally, suggesting that the disabled body is paradigmatic of the body itself.

Chapter 4

Jean-Luc Nancy: The Body of Extension

*What a strange me!
Not because they opened me up, gaping, to change the
heart. But because this gaping cannot be sealed back
up.*
- Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*

In *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida heralds Nancy as “the greatest thinker about touching of all time” (4). In an effort “to avoid sounding pathetic and excessive,” Derrida rephrases, claiming that Nancy is the greatest thinker about touching “not of all time, perhaps, but ever since Aristotle suddenly hit on the manifold aporia of touch” (4).

Although Derrida might be giving into hyperbole even in his rephrasing, his sentiment reminds us of the importance of Nancy’s work for reconsidering the role of touch in the Western tradition of metaphysics. In this chapter, I consider how Nancy’s conception of the body, and thus the self, constituted by the trace, is originally extended. My effort in this chapter is to explore Nancy’s work on touch and embodiment in *Corpus* (and to a certain extent Derrida’s reading of Nancy’s touch in *On Touching*), and in the process to demonstrate how Nancy’s theory of touch is significant for a thinking of sight and blindness. As will emerge in what follows, Nancy’s theorizing of extension is complementary to Derrida’s work on the myth of immediacy and Wills’ work on prosthesis in suggesting that sight and blindness are not binary same/different opposites.

While Nancy does not extensively consider questions of blindness and vision in *Corpus*—like Wills in this respect—the motif of extension that is central to his theorization of touch and embodiment has important implications for a thinking of sight and blindness.

For Nancy, the body does not reside in the post-Cartesian division of “mind” from “body” and is neither signifier nor signified; rather the body, as Nancy considers it, exists as the limit between these two—or any other binary pair—as their touching each other. This body constitutes a spacing of space. That is, the body should not be thought of as a thing that takes up space but rather as spatial in the sense that it is *open* space (*Corpus* 17). Existing in this liminal state between the two sides of the traditional Cartesian dualism, the body, as Nancy conceives it, is perpetually externalizing, *partes extra partes*. In a constant state of externalizing or displacing, the body is never actually “itself” (see 29). Rather, and this is significant for me here for the reason that, since the body is constantly “selving” (113), it cannot be called up in the present, in some singular subjectivity. For Nancy, this thwarts any claim to pure identity since through this process of perpetually “selving,” identity is never fixed. In this way, Nancy complicates the assumption that the self is constituted by its ability to be completely present in the idealized, interiority of the mind. Additionally, the spacing that constitutes the body is one that opens the body to the prosthetic—the supplementary, the primordial spacing of the trace.

The first task I take up in this chapter is to outline the connection between the metaphysics of touch and the metaphysics of sight. Although I addressed them both in Chapter Two, to a certain extent, I explore them here in relation to Nancy’s conception of intelligible extension. Having done so, it is possible for me to turn to selected components of the metaphysics of touch—the “untouchable” in relation to “self-touching,” the motif of extension more generally, and the body of sense—with the intention of drawing from Nancy’s work a thinking of vision and blindness.

The Metaphysics of Touch and Sight

Despite what the title of Derrida's text, *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*, suggests, the book does more than enumerate the ways in which Nancy's work on touch is important for contemporary critical theory. Rather, Derrida takes on the entire Western metaphysical tradition, reading it as a tradition of touch, a "tactilist" or "haptocentric" tradition that extends from Aristotle at least up to, and including, Edmund Husserl (see 41). The "touch" of this tradition is one that privileges mind over body. The body of traditional philosophy, according to Nancy, is a signifying body which "*incarnates* only one thing: the absolute contradiction of not being able to be a *body* without being the *body of a spirit*, which disembodies it" (*Corpus* 69).²³

As I note in Chapter Two, the touch of this tradition is a fully interiorized self-touch that refers back to the self and is associated with pure self-presence. In other words, this touch is interiorized: one touches oneself in pure immediacy, in the non-space where one achieves absolute proximity with oneself. That is to say, metaphysics disembodies touch, associating it with intelligibility; it is extension without a body. Similarly, the metaphysics of sight that Derrida addresses in *Memoirs of the Blind* has nothing to do with eyes, so to speak. The sight of this tradition is also disembodied, associated with intelligible perception. As a result, the tradition casts "blindness" as darkness, as rational obfuscation. Martin Heidegger's writing on the hand that grasps is an example of this disembodied extension. The grasping hand, for Heidegger, is one that grabs hold of a thing in its essence, and as Heidegger is careful to point out, this hand is fundamentally distinct from

²³ All emphases in Nancy's and Derrida's texts are from the original unless otherwise noted.

an animal organ—a physical hand, a paw, claw, or talon. For Heidegger, as for metaphysics generally, the seer’s grasp draws conceptually close to the essence of something, locates its essence.²⁴ Important to note here is that this grasping can be done with the hand or with sight since both are associated with rational thought. For Husserl, and many others, it is through the work of this metaphysical hand (or, again, the intelligible perception associated with sight) that we are able to grasp and know, to bring things into immediacy. Of course, those to whom this ability is not available are conceived of as deficient. In this way, touch becomes the most important sense for Husserl, who continuously subverts the other senses in favour of this metaphysical touch (*On Touching* 170-71). Another example, even more crucially tied to the present study, is Nancy’s notion of “self-touching.”

Critical for an understanding of Nancy’s theory of extension is his conception of “self-touching.” As Derrida points out, the Western metaphysical tradition is very much a tradition of touch that associates the interiorized touch with self-referentiality and absolute self-presence (see *On Touching* 41). That is to say, it is assumed that someone can be immediate to oneself through self-touching. According to Derrida, Nancy deviates from the

²⁴ In “*Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand*” (1987), Derrida takes on Heidegger’s argument that “[a]ll work of the hand is rooted in thinking. Therefore, thinking itself is man’s simplest, and for that reason hardest, *Hand-werk*, if it would be properly accomplished” (Derrida quoting Heidegger from *What is Called Thinking?*, “*Geschlecht II*” 175). Derrida is critical of the way that Heidegger denies the animal the hand. For Heidegger, the hand distinguishes the human as a “being of monstration” (“*Geschlecht II*” 169), that is, a being that signs, shows, or demonstrates. In this way, for Heidegger, there is a direct correlation between the presence of the hand and the ability to think and use language. Because animals have only prehensile organs, Heidegger cuts them off from these possibilities that come with the hand. The hand that grasps is important for me since what this grasping (disembodied) hand reaches out for is the essence of something. This essence is akin to the aura of the work of art as conceived of by Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” or the trait or trace for Derrida. In both cases, the closer one tries to bring the aura/trait/trace, the further away it becomes.

rest of French philosophy since he does not assume a connection between pure self-presence and the sense of touch. Rather, Nancy problematizes this idea of pure self-presence that predominates in the Western philosophical tradition by calling into question the assumption that people can be fully present to themselves by way of an idealized, interiorized self-touch since, for Nancy, “[a] body touches on the outside, but at the same time (and this is more than a correlation, it’s a co-appurtance), it touches itself as outside” (“On the Soul,” *Corpus* 128). Again, this self-touch is not the touch of an embodied hand. Rather, it is a touch that comes with the extension of thought, which I will return to in the pages that follow. For the time being, I would like to emphasize how, by re-embodiment the sense of touch, Nancy problematizes one of the basic tenets of the metaphysics of touch in such a way that collapses the association between touch and rationality. Likewise, Nancy’s re-embodiment of the senses more generally challenges the metaphysical tradition’s relationship between sight and intelligibility. In this way, Nancy thwarts any possibility of pure immediacy and challenges the assumption that one can be in absolute proximity to the self through these idealized senses of touch and sight.

“Self-Touching” and the “Untouchable”

The privileging of immediacy, for Nancy and Derrida, is a pitfall that plagues certain philosophers, such as Husserl, writing about touch (*On Touching* 127). For these philosophers, the body becomes the body of the mind/body dualism only by its ability to refer to itself, that is, by turning its disembodied finger towards itself and saying “I” (163). “Self-touching” is completely internalized as a “return to a primary interiority” (“On the Soul,” *Corpus* 128). Nancy counters this internalization of the self-touch by arguing that

“we only gain access to ourselves from outside. I am an outside for myself. [. . .] It’s through my skin that I touch myself. And I touch myself from outside, I don’t touch myself from inside” (128). Nancy criticizes previous theorists whose “phenomenological analyses of ‘self-touching’ always return[s] to a primary interiority” (128). This is problematic, according to Nancy, as well as impossible. “To begin with,” he writes in “On the Soul,” “I have to be in exteriority in order to touch myself. And what I touch remains on the outside. I am exposed to myself touching myself. And therefore—but this is the difficult point—the body is always outside, on the outside. It is from the outside. The body is always outside the intimacy of the body itself” (128-29). Nancy points to the problems associated with conceiving of the self-touch as an interiorized touch. Instead, he notes a, perhaps obvious, detail that whenever we touch ourselves or even sense some sort of “soul,” we sense it from the outside. In an attempt to avoid confusion, I want to note that just as, for Nancy, the “body” is not the body of the post-Cartesian mind/body dualism, his use of “soul” is the same. Rather, his use of “soul” “has to do with trying to make use of the word *soul* as a lever to help us understand this outside of the body, this outside that the body is *for itself*. The soul being outside of a body, and it is in this being outside that it has its inside” (129). And whatever remains on the inside is untouchable.

Nancy’s task regarding “touching” is to theorize or ponder touching “while touching on, or tampering with, the untouchable” (see *On Touching* 18).²⁵ That is to say, as

²⁵ The figure of Psyche as well as Freud’s posthumous aphorism—“The psyche’s extended: knows nothing about it” (*Psyche ist ausgedehnt: Weiss nichts davon*)—plays a significant role in *Corpus*, among other texts of Nancy’s. In the myth, Psyche lies resting, extended, under a walnut tree, her bosom partially exposed. Eros contemplates her from a distance. And Psyche is unaware of this. Nancy continues, “Psyche is extended in her coffin. Soon it is going to be shut. Among those present, some are hiding their faces, others are keeping their eyes desperately fixed on Psyche’s body. She knows nothing of this—and that is what everyone knows around

Derrida writes, “this thinking of touch, this thought of what ‘touching’ means, must touch on the untouchable” (18). As far as touching is concerned, for Descartes and others, extension will always remain intelligible, and thus “intangible,” according to Derrida (72). What is intelligible is exactly what remains outside of the opportunity of touch. As a result, “[t]he extension of a body, a body inasmuch as it is extended, can thus remain untouchable” (72). And so it is that the “touchable is what it is impossible to touch” (104). Here, Derrida and Nancy do not refute any possibility of intelligible extension. Rather, there is, as Derrida writes, “an incredible extension, that of the soul or thought” that remains untouchable (24). Nancy’s work here is significant for my thesis since he problematizes the idealization of touch—and the other senses generally—as fully idealized. As a result of this, touch (and sight) cannot be associated with rationality and the ability to be in absolute proximity to the self since this “self” is untouchable in Nancy’s work. By challenging this association, Nancy challenges conceptions of blindness as a lack, as denied access to identity.

Nancy’s Theorization of Extension

In *On Touching* Derrida queries whether or not we can “imagine an extension that is untouchable” (16). Here, he points us to the “extension of thought” that Nancy calls into question in his work. This disembodied extension is what is at work in the metaphysics of touch and sight. As Derrida points out, this untouchable extension is not difficult to figure for theorists such as Descartes and Kant who conceive of “an intelligible extension without

her, with such exact and cruel knowledge” (“Psyche” 393). This is what makes Psyche a figure of both “touch” and “sight” for Nancy. Although those who stand around her see her, she remains untouchable. She is tangible, yet untouchable (see *On Touching* 64-65).

a body at issue” (16). What is at issue, then, for Nancy, is the paradox of this extension (*On Touching* 24). “It seems that,” Derrida writes, “one can only touch an extended body or some part of it, but not every extension is necessarily touchable. There is an intelligible or *pure, sensible* extension, a nonempirical extension” (24). This extension and the extension of the body constitute, according to Derrida, the two modes of spacing operating in Nancy’s work—“the extension of the body (which is easy for common sense to apprehend, [. . .]) and the extension of the psyche or thinking (which is paradoxical extension resisting intuition, perception, and consciousness)” (24). The extension I concern myself with here, primarily, is the latter, which I return to in a discussion of the trace in the pages that follow.

Going back to the example of self-touching that I addressed earlier on, it is important to consider how this double extension touches, or more precisely self-touches. Rather than associating touch with self-referentiality, Nancy conceives of thought as touching itself without returning to itself (*Corpus* 117). In *Corpus*, Nancy disputes the idea of the auto-affective “I” associated with self-touch, challenging the notion of the body as closed and finite. By doing so, Nancy’s conception of touch complicates the subjectivity of the “I.” He writes that the “I” “is extremely fragile, since we should say, not that ‘I,’ body, am touched and touch in turn—that I’m sensed—but rather try to say (and this is the whole difficulty) that ‘I’ is a touch” (“On the Soul,” *Corpus* 131, my emphasis). This is where Nancy’s work on touch is important for questions of self and identity. He writes:

“I” is nothing other than the singularity of a touch, of a touch that is always at once active and passive, and that, as a touch, evokes something punctual—a touch in the sense of a touch of color, in the sense of a pianist’s touch, and, why not?, in the sense of the old argot, when we would say that we put the touch on someone (scoring . . .). The unity of a body, its singularity, is the unity of a touch, of all the touches, (of all the touchings) of this body. And it’s this unity that can make a self, an identity. But it’s not a matter of a self, an identity or a subject as the interior of an exterior. It’s not, in accordance with the old image that we’ve dragged along

since the beginning of philosophy, about a very ugly Socrates who's very beautiful inside: interiority, the inside; subjectivity as incommensurable with exteriority, extension, and exposition. No, it's a matter of a 'one,' and a 'someone,' of the unity or singularity of what I in effect really want us to keep calling an identity, an ego, a self, a subject, provided that the subjectivity of this subject is clearly understood as being outside the self, as a 'self-sensing,' but as a 'self-sensing' that is exactly not a being posed by oneself and an appropriating of oneself to oneself in a pure interiority, but a being in exteriority in relation to itself. We sense ourselves as an outside. ("On the Soul," *Corpus* 131-32)

Through this theorization of touch Nancy thwarts any ability to achieve full self-presence or immediacy since touch, for Nancy, is always a nontouch, always distended, divided, mediated, grafted, parted, or prosthetic (see Hillis Miller 276-78). The "I," Derrida writes, "signs the possibility or the need for the said 'I' (as soon as it touches itself) to address itself, to speak to itself, to treat of itself (in a soliloquy interrupted in advance) *as an other*. No sooner does 'I [touch] itself' than it is itself—it contracts itself, it contracts with itself, but as if with another. It addresses itself to itself and says *tu* to itself" (*On Touching* 34). Derrida describes this as an "unavoidably familiar address of oneself—of oneself as the first or the last other" (34). In this way, the "I" is constituted by otherness—this otherness, for my purposes here, is disability. The "I" can never reach absolute self-presence since with this touch comes a contraction, a pulling back. The "I" "self-touches spacing itself out, losing contact with itself, precisely in touching itself. It switches off the contact, it abstains from touching, so as to touch itself" (34). This opens up questions of extension and spacing to the trace, a topic to which I turn next. But first, this spacing is significant for my thesis since this extension that constitutes the "I" jeopardizes the "I's" ability to attain self-presence. It also challenges the assumption that the "I" originates in some sort of wholeness. As a result, disability cannot be conceived of as a deviation from a "natural" wholeness.

Originary Extension—The Trace

As I noted in Chapter Two, the trace cannot be grasped or localized since it is continuously taking leave or parting from itself. Similarly, this openness, as Nancy conceives of it, is always necessarily an imparting of parts—a partition or departure—since the body is constantly in a state of externalizing (*Corpus* 29). That is, the *extra* of *partes-extra-partes* constitutes an imparting of parts, a partition or departure. It is here that Nancy finds Descartes' error, that is, when he conceived “of the *extra* as a void, undifferentiated, when it's very precisely the place of differentiation, of ‘corporation,’ a taking-place of weighing, and consequently of the community of the world” (97). By perpetually departing from itself, the body is constituted by its openness to difference, by its *différance*. Constituted by *différance*, the “I” is originally extended.

As soon as the body meets up with itself, it contracts and moves away from itself. As I noted at the beginning of the chapter, the body, for Nancy, is in a perpetual process of selving. It is in a constant play of differences. As such, the body continues to open to difference and is therefore always in a state of deferral. In this way, for Nancy, the body is “open space,” perpetually opening to a new state of openness (*Corpus* 15). Significant here is that “‘the open’ is not, and cannot be, ‘substantive.’ The ‘extra’ is not a ‘pars’ among other ‘partes,’ but an imparting of parts. Imparting, partition, departure” (29). This imparting is indicative of Derrida's *différance*, as demonstrated in Chapter Two, and this spacing that constitutes a departure echoes Derrida's writing on painting and blindness in *Memoirs of the Blind*. That is, this spacing is constitutive of a turning away, a trace, or a dislocation. This dislocation points to “[t]he empty identity of the ‘I’ [that] can no longer

rely on its simple adequation (in its ‘I = I’)” (“The Intruder,” *Corpus* 169). The identity of the self is not one that is created through a closed circuit of referentiality that remains purely interiorized. It is not a self-sensing that begins and ends with an idealized interiority. Rather, as Nancy concludes in “The Intruder,” the self is constituted by its exteriority, by its extension and it only relates to itself by way of this expanse (*Corpus* 170). Through this theorization of the “I,” Nancy overturns the structural opposition between intelligibility and sensibility. As a result of which, the disabled body cannot be conceived of as a departure from the “normal” body associated with rationality. Likewise, blindness cannot be thought of as vision’s “other,” as ontologically deficient in comparison to the self-referentiality associated with the idealized senses.

Despite being critical of the Western metaphysical tradition’s privileging of touch by aligning it with immediacy, Nancy still considers touch the most important sense since it gives way to an opening. That is to say, touch, for Nancy, is not a touch that returns to itself. Rather, it is a touch that is constantly taking leave of itself. As Nancy writes, “[t]here’s no intact matter—or else there’d be nothing. On the contrary, there’s tact, the pose and deposing, the rhythm of the coming-and-going of the bodies in the world. Tact untied, *divided unto itself*” (*Corpus* 117, my emphasis). In this way, touch is constituted by a departure that opens the body to difference. However, “[w]ithout ever letting go of his insistence on the tactile,” Derrida writes in *On Touching*, “Nancy always associates it, *against* the continuist tradition of immediacy, with the value of apartness, displacement, spacing, partition, parting, dividing, or sharing out” (127). That is to say, “[t]he created body is there, meaning *between* here and there, abandoned, always improperly abandoned, created” (*Corpus* 99). This “here and there” constitutes the body’s “vertiginous withdrawal

of the self *from* the self that is needed to open the infinity of that withdrawal *all the way up to self*,” a “departure of self to self” (33). This is important for my thesis since it points to an originary departure that constitutes the human. That is, disability is not a departure from an embodied life rooted in presence since embodied life, originating in a primordial spacing, partition, deviation, does not emerge from presence and, for Nancy (as with Derrida and Wills), can never achieve it.

One key component to Nancy’s conception of extension is that the body knows nothing of its selving (*Corpus* 113).²⁶ However, as is the case with Derrida’s conception of blindness, this nonknowledge is not constitutive of a lack or deficiency since “bodies don’t belong to an order where ‘knowing’ is at stake” (113). Important for Nancy is that “[e]xperience is neither knowledge nor nonknowledge. Experience is a passage, a transport from border to border, an endless transport from shore to shore, all along a tracing that develops and limits an areality” (113). Nancy’s work here calls into question the assumption that there is an intelligibility that can be called up and made knowable. This poses a serious problem for a metaphysics that assumes that visual perception is trustworthy and able to grasp anything in its conceptual essence. Furthermore, this contributes significantly into my discussion of the discourse of identification prevalent in

²⁶ Returning to Psyche, for Nancy, she is a figure that demonstrates this nonknowledge. According to Nancy, “Psyche, here, is the name of the body, as presupposed *neither* according to a substratum sunk into matter *nor* according to an already-given superstratum of self-knowledge” (*Corpus* 95). As Derrida notes in *On Touching*, Psyche obstructs any possibility of immediacy since she, herself, is characterized by her absence of knowledge (65). She is not aware of (*does not see*) those that gather around her, gawking at her. She is also unaware of her own extension. Because of this nonknowledge Psyche “has no self-relation” (*On Touching* 15). Marked by this nonknowledge, Psyche jeopardizes the Aristotelian assumption that the soul “can have self-knowledge” (see 19). This scene, where Psyche lies extended with her eyes closed, is where we might find some idea of a primordial state of blindness.

disability studies in the next chapter, where I will suggest that in its preoccupation with the question of who can speak on behalf of disability, disability studies assumes the self is knowable.

Nancy's "Body" and the Body of Sense

Nancy argues that we must think about the body as "something open and infinite, about the opening of closure itself, the infinite of the finite itself" (*Corpus* 122). "Bodies aren't some kind of fullness or filled space," he writes, "they are *open* space, implying, in some sense, a space more properly *spacious* than spatial, what could also be called a *place*" (15). That is to say, for Nancy, the body is not necessarily full or empty "since it doesn't have an outside or an inside, any more than it has parts, a totality, functions, or finality. It's acephalic or aphillic in every sense, as it were" (15). The body cannot be thought of within the structure of these strict binary categorizations—inside/outside, intelligibility/sensibility, etc. "*Bodies don't take place in discourse or in matter. They don't inhabit 'mind' or 'body,'*" for Nancy. Rather, "[t]hey take place at the limit, *qua limit*: limit—external border, the fracture and intersection of anything foreign in a continuum of sense, a continuum of matter. An opening, discreteness" (17).²⁷ Occurring at this limit, "[t]he soul is the extension or the expanse of the body" ("On the Soul," *Corpus* 134).²⁸ Nancy expands:

²⁷ In *Word Made Skin: Figuring Language at the Surface of Flesh* (2004), Karmen MacKendrick is very much influenced by Nancy's work on touch and embodiment. By arguing that language can touch but not grasp, MacKendrick criticizes the Western philosophical tradition that was dominated by the question "What is..." For MacKendrick, this question seeks to grasp (it is a prehensile question) by attempting to take hold of something, overcome, and understand it (7). MacKendrick argues, rather, that we need to more closely consider the question brought forth by Nietzsche, "Which one..." This question does not attempt to grasp but touches, folds, and cuts (7). This, for MacKendrick, constitutes a philosophy of openings. MacKendrick describes how, for Nancy, the subject always appears in spaces since there is "no self without the need for that

by this name [i.e. soul] that, for us, symbolizes the other of the body, through this couple [i.e. mind and body], which generally expresses a couple of exteriority, of contrariety, of opposition and negation, I'd like something else to be understood, which departs from this Platonic and Christian tradition but which would not simply and purely be something else. I don't want to speak of a body without a soul, any more than a soul without a body. It's not a matter of reconstituting a pure immanence, because that would be, as I've said, the mass, or excrement. No, instead it has to do with trying to make use of the word *soul* as a lever to help us understand this outside of the body, this outside that the body is *for itself*. The soul is the being outside of a body, and it is in this being outside that it has its inside. (129)

Perhaps I'm dwelling on this too much, but understanding Nancy's "body" is crucial to understanding how he figures touch and the motif of extension. According to Nancy, "[w]hen we want to talk about the body, we need to break with a certain reflex. We spontaneously think of body *against* soul. The body is considered physical, material, carnal reality" ("On the Soul," *Corpus* 133).²⁹ Instead of giving into this reflex, Nancy encourages

which it is not" (23). Influenced by Nancy, MacKendrick holds that word, touch, and desire are mobile. As such, they are not locatable (62). They are always "*between*" (62, emphasis in original).

²⁸ Problematizing the separation of mind and body, Nancy conceives of Psyche as body, that is, as spacing (21). Here, I would like to briefly consider Psyche as a figure of blindness. I think Derrida puts it well at the beginning of *On Touching*. He describes how "she" (Psyche) came to him one day. But she did not come to visit him. Instead, "'she' took hold of me, 'she' invaded me even before I had seen 'her' coming: 'she' touched me before letting 'herself' be seen" (1). In this way, since we cannot see Psyche coming or see her invade our bodies, we are rendered blind. She comes from outside our field of visual perception. Perhaps this could be termed a primordial or originary state of blindness.

²⁹ With this traditional binary as the pinnacle of Nancy's criticism of Western metaphysics, the structural opposition between speech and writing comes to the fore. Indeed, writing and touching have a very close relationship in Nancy's work. That is to say, for Nancy, "it has to be said that touching upon the body, touching the body, *touching*—happens in writing all the time" (*Corpus* 11). More precisely, "along the border, at the limit, the tip, the furthest edge of writing nothing *but* that [touching] happens. How, writing takes its place at the limit. So if anything at all happens to writing, nothing happens to it but *touch*. More precisely: touching the body (or some singular body) *with the incorporeality* of 'sense.' And consequently, *to make the incorporeal touching*, to make of meaning a touch" (11). That is to say, there is no writing, for Nancy, that doesn't touch since "[w]riting in its essence touches upon the body" (11). "Thus,"

thinking of the body as an openness that dissolves the boundary between interiority and exteriority. I consider this essential to my thesis since it problematizes the connection the Western tradition makes between vision and rationality.

For Nancy, the body is not the body “produced by the autoproduction of the spirit and its reproduction,” which always only produces a single body (*Corpus* 89). Conceiving of the body, rather, as multiple, there can never be any, as Derrida calls it, “general-singular” “the” body, in the same way that there can never be any “the” touch (*Corpus* 89, 119, *On Touching* 286). For Nancy, it is not as if there is a “the” body that can be called upon to signify or to represent some essential body. Rather, the body is really bodies. That is, the body must always be thought of as a multiplicity of bodies. Breaking with traditional conceptions of the body, Nancy argues that, “the body’s a thing of extension. The body is a thing of exposition. It’s not just that the body is exposed but that the body *consists* in being exposed. A body is being exposed. And to be exposed, it has to be extended, not perhaps in the sense of Descartes’ *res extensa*, which we think of right away, a thing that’s flat, mechanical, and absolutely deprived of soul or spirit” (“On the Soul,” *Corpus* 124). Again, the body, for Nancy, is not the post-Cartesian “body” in opposition to the soul, which, as opposed to “mind,” is an “inorganic, physical body,” something “closed” (123). For any thinking of disability, this means that the disabled body cannot be thought of as an inanimate, automaton, cut off from accessing identity.

Nancy continues, “for every writing, a body is the own-other edge: a body (or more than one body, or a mass, or more than one mass), is therefore also the traced, the tracing, and the trace (*here, see, read, take, hoc est enim corpus meum ...*). In all writing a body is the letter, yet never the letter, or else, more remotely, more deconstructed than any literality, it’s a ‘lettricity’ no longer meant to be read. What in a writing, and properly so, is not to be read—that’s what a body is” (87).

By being engaged in a constant opening or extending, the body is always involved in a movement of deferral, resulting in “a body [that] never stops *selving*” (*Corpus* 113).

Nancy writes:

Bodies always about to leave, on the verge of a movement, a fall, a gap, a dislocation. (Even the simplest *departure* is just this: the moment when some body's no longer *there*, right *here* where he was. The moment he makes room for a lone gulf in the spacing that he himself *is*. A departing body carries its spacing away, itself gets carried away as spacing, and somehow it sets itself aside, withdraws into itself—while leaving its very spacing “behind”—as one says—in *its place*, with this place remaining its own, at once absolutely intact and absolutely abandoned. *Hoc est enim absentia corporis et tamen corpus ipse.*)

This spacing, this departure, is its very intimacy, the extremity of its separation (or, if we prefer, of its distinction, its singularity, even its subjectivity). The body is *self* in departure, insofar as it parts—displaces itself right here from the *here*. The intimacy of the body *exposes* pure a-seity as the swerve and departure that it *is*. Aseity—the *a-se(lf)*, the to-itself, the by-itself of the Subject—*exists* only as the swerve and departure of this *a*—(of this *a-part-self*), which is the place, the moment proper of its presence, its authenticity, its sense. The *a-part-self*, as *departure*, is what's exposed. (33)

In this passage, Nancy points us to questions of presence. What I would like to draw out of this quotation is that, for Nancy, by being constituted by its exteriority, its spacing, the self is also constituted by its perpetual departure. It is always in a state of leaving. By constantly “selving,” the self can never meet up with itself. Therefore, any chance at attaining full self-presence is lost. For the purposes of my thesis, this suggests that a lack of self-presence cannot be seen in the eyes of the blind since, in Nancy's theorization of extension, the self can never be called up and made present. Nancy states, “it becomes a question of thinking the unity of being outside the self, the unity of the coming to self as a ‘self-sensing,’ a ‘self-touching’ that necessarily passes through the outside—which is why I can't sense myself without sensing otherness and without being sensed by the other” (“On the Soul,” *Corpus* 133). In Nancy's articulation of the body, it is by touching the other that the body is a body (“Corpus” 204).

Nancy problematizes the separation of intelligibility and sensibility in his discussion of the body of sense. The body of sense, for Nancy, exposes a suspension of sense, prohibiting any strict taxonomy of the senses (*Corpus* 23). He writes, “the body is the articulation, or better yet, the *organ* or *organon* of the sign: it is, for our entire tradition [i.e. the Western tradition], that *in which* sense is given and *out of which* sense emerges” (“Corpus” 192). That is to say, the body is the work of sense, not the result of sense. As a result of which, a discourse of the body cannot find its origin in any ideality of sense. “But as such,” Nancy continues, “regardless of the perspective used—dualism of body and soul, monism of the flesh, symbolic deciphering of bodies—, the body remains the organon, the instrument or the incarnation, the mechanism or the work of a *sense* that never stops rushing into it, presenting itself to itself, making itself known as such and wanting to tell itself there” (192). As such, the body is always leaning towards exposure. In this way, “the body never ceases to contradict itself. It is the place of contradiction *par excellence*” (192).

Nancy writes:

I’ll undoubtedly be told that concentration or extension, the en-topic or ec-topic, *are already interpretations*. And that therefore all bodies are caught up in a network of signification, and that no ‘free body’ floats beyond sense. I say in reply that *sense itself will float, in order to stop or start at its limit*: and that this limit *is the body*, and not as a pure and simple exteriority of sense, or as some unknown, intact, untouchable matter, thrust into some improbably transcendence closed in the densest immediacy (such, indeed, is the extreme caricature of ‘the sensory’ in all idealisms and materialisms)—*not then, finally, as ‘the body,’ but instead as THE BODY OF SENSE*. (*Corpus* 23, capitals in original)

Nancy’s “body of sense” does not leave room for any idealized sense. In other words, “[i]n no way is the *body of sense* the incarnation of an ideality of ‘sense’: on the contrary, it is the end of such an ideality—and thus the end of sense as well, since it no longer returns to itself or refers to itself (to an ideality making ‘sense’ of it)—suspending itself *at a limit that*

makes its own most proper 'sense' and exposes it as such" (23). I consider this very important for the theorizing of disability since by considering a sense in which the body is at issue, Nancy dismantles the idealization of the senses that aligns them with pure rationality. In this way, blindness cannot be conceived of as darkness or as ontologically deficient. Nancy writes, "we will not call it 'the body of sense,' as if 'sense' at this limit could still be the support or subject of anything at all: instead, and absolutely so, we will call it *the body, as the absolute of sense itself, properly exposed*" (25). Although Nancy's discussion of sense is primarily of sense in general, he dedicates a brief section in *Corpus* to the place of vision in the Western tradition, which I return to in a moment.

The Intruder

Before I turn to Nancy's treatment of vision and further implications of his work for a thinking of blindness, I consider Nancy's short piece, "The Intruder," in order to further develop the motif of extension that I have just explored. "The Intruder" is an autobiographical text, although Nancy questions who is this "I" of the text, "who is the subject of this utterance" (162), in which he describes the time leading up to and following his heart transplant over ten years ago. As a result of having his immune system lowered, a procedure done to ensure that the body of the grafter does not reject the graft, Nancy develops a lymphoma. This procedure of lowering the immune system and the possibility of rejection has a double strangeness for Nancy. He writes:

the strangeness, on the one hand, of this grafted heart, which the organism identifies and attacks as being a stranger, and, on the other hand, the strangeness of the state in which medication renders the grafter in order to protect him. It lowers the grafter's immunity, so that he can tolerate the stranger. It thereby makes him a stranger to himself, to this immunitary identity, which is akin to his physiological

signature. (167)³⁰

This quotation points to one of the primary themes of “The Intruder”—opening. That is, the opening that allows the stranger to gain entry puts the grafter at risk for this double strangeness.

“The Intruder” engages in a complicated play of openings. As Peggy Kamuf notes in “Béance,” “[t]he experience of grafting is recorded [in “The Intruder”] as a series of openings” (39).³¹ That is to say, before he is surgically opened, Nancy describes how it felt to receive the news that he would need a transplant. He writes:

Just the physical sensation of a void already opened up in the chest, a sort of apnea where nothing, absolutely nothing, even today, could help me disentangle the organic from the symbolic and imaginary, or disentangle what was continuous from what was interrupted: it was like a single gasp, exhaled thereafter through a strange cavern already imperceptibly opened up and like the spectacle, indeed, leaping overboard while staying up on the bridge. (162)

The doctor’s news aggravates a void that existed “*already* imperceptibly opened up in the chest” (see Kamuf 39-40). That is to say, the surgical operation does not mark a first opening. Not even the news of this future opening constitutes a first opening. Rather,

³⁰ Nancy continues after this quotation, “[b]ut becoming a stranger to myself does not draw me closer to the intruder. Rather, it would appear that a general law of intrusion is being revealed. There has never been just one intrusion: as soon as one is produced, it multiplies itself, is identified in its renewed internal differences” (167). This double strangeness is suggestive of Derrida’s conception of autoimmunity. Autoimmunity indicates an attempt to close off the self from the other, even if it means doing violence to the self. This is done in order to preserve the self from the perceived threat of the other. That is to say, autoimmunity constitutes a turning on what is internal to the self. (See further Derrida’s *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* [2005].)

³¹ In “Béance,” Kamuf reads “The Intruder” alongside Nancy’s “Is Everything Political?” She does so “through the grammar or lexicon of, precisely, ‘opening,’ ‘open’” (39). One of the ways she does this is by drawing attention to Nancy’s use of *béant* and *béance*, as opposed to *ouvert* in these two texts. For my purposes here, Kamuf’s text points to the implications of choosing *béant* (gaping) over *ouvert* (opening). Kamuf notes, “while open and closed form a pair and a conceptual opposition, gaping (*béant*) names a state of beings or entities for which there is no simple opposite, no closure” (41).

Nancy's description of this physical sensation suggests an opening that was already there, indicating, perhaps, some primordial opening that is constitutive of the body itself. What makes this opening strange, for Nancy, is not its openness, but that it does not point to a necessary closure. He exclaims:

What a strange me!

Not because they opened me up, gaping, to change the heart. But because this gaping cannot be sealed back up. (In fact, as every X-ray shows, the sternum is stitched with filaments of twisted steel.) *I am closed open*. Through the opening passes a ceaseless flux of strangeness: immuno-depressor medications, other medications meant to combat certain so-called secondary effects, effects that we do not know how to combat (the degrading of the kidneys), renewed controls, all existence set on a new register, stirred up and around. Life scanned and reported onto multiple registers, all of them recording other possibilities of death. (167-68, my emphasis)

Nancy captures here the movement that accompanies this gaping openness.

This "flux of strangeness" that passes through this opening causes Nancy to question the state of his "I" since it indicates that the "'I' clearly became the formal index of an unverifiable and impalpable change" (168). He continues, "[b]etween me and me, there had always been some space-time: but now there is an incision's opening, and the irreconcilability of a compromised immune system" (168). Nancy concludes, "the subject's truth is its exteriority and its excessiveness: its infinite exposition. The intruder exposes me to excess. It extrudes me, exports me, expropriates me" (170). The extension of the subject is crucial for how Nancy problematizes assumptions that the self can reach a state of pure immediacy. The extension of the subject is thus crucial for disability: it implies that the self is originally extended, never able to reach pure self-presence. As a result, disability cannot be thought of as a departure from some idealized interiority. Rather, Nancy's work suggests that disability serves as the paradigm for the body itself.

“Fragmentary, Fractal, Shadowy”: Nancy on Vision

As I noted at the outset of this chapter, a point that I have been belabouring since the outset of this thesis, traditional Western metaphysical characterizations of sight generally associate it with the ability to make an image fully present, to perceive, to know. In *Corpus*, drawing on Plato, Nancy calls this *epopteia*, or completed sight. This completed sight is the “most potent visionary model of metaphysics,” “meaning the sight that brings us beyond initiation (which only ‘understands’) to ‘contemplation,’ a ‘super-sight’ that is a ‘devouring of the eyes’ (the eye devouring its very self), a *grasping* and finally a *touching*: the very absolute of touching, touching-the-other as being-touched, each being absorbed and devoured in the other” (45). Completed sight, according to Nancy, is “an eye planted in the middle of the face” (45). The vision of this eye is “properly and absolutely a vision of death,” according to Nancy, since the singularity of its vision results in the death of the other that it brings into its vision. This all-seeing eye leaves nowhere for the other to hide. Completed sight attempts to possess the object of its gaze by grasping it and bringing it into immediacy. However, this sight itself constitutes a type of blindness since it neglects what lies outside of itself.

Nancy counters this completed sight that assumes an ability to grasp, to touch absolutely by proffering a conception of sight that is not constituted by “the *consummation* of the Mystery of Sensory Certitude” (45). Nancy describes his alternative conception of sight as follows:

Areality is not to be seen—not as the *epopteia* wants us to see. There is no way to see it: *neither* as the extension or pure ex-tensiveness of the body, something beyond-the-self that, as such, cannot lend (itself) to sight (being posed by the logic of Mystery as ‘unpresentable,’ *with the aim of* presenting it to its over-optics), *nor*, simultaneously and identically, as the presentable itself: the determinate configuration, or *characteristic*, of this body *here*. Because we would see nothing of

this body here if we only saw it in the pure visibility of its presentation. To see *a body* is precisely not to grasp it with *a* vision: sight itself is distended and spaced by this body here, it does not embrace the totality of *aspects*. An ‘aspect’ is itself a fragment of the areal trace, and sight is fragmentary, fractal, shadowy. And anyway, the body is seen by a body... (45)

As fragmentary, fractal, shadowy, sight necessarily leaves something out. The authority of a completely knowable vision falls away, and what is left is what cannot be seen. Where the completed sight of *epopteia* only recognizes one sight, comprising only one vision, Nancy opens sight to a multitude of sights.

The vision of sight, for Nancy, is not one that penetrates. Rather, it “glides along swerves and follows along departures. It is a touching that does not absorb but moves along lines and recesses, inscribing and exscribing the body” (45). “The sight of bodies,” according to Nancy, “is the accomplice of the visible—of the ostentation and extension that the visible *is*. Complicity, consent: the one who sees *compears* with what he sees. This is how they can be discerned, according to the infinitely finite measure of just clarity” (47). For Nancy, “the nocturnal eye of the [Plato’s] cave sees *itself*, and sees itself as nocturnal, sees itself as the privation of day. The body is the subject of shadow—and its shadowy *seeing* is also, already, the imprint, the remainder of light, the sign of solar vision. *Lux in tenebris*, the body of the incarnation is *the sign*, absolutely” (67). In this way, we might think of blindness as prior to sight in Nancy’s work since for him, sight is always necessarily characterized by what eludes it—just as the body is unaware of its extending.

Blindness and the Extended Body

By conceiving of the body as extended, Nancy overrides conceptions of mind and body as specifically inside and outside. In this way, blindness cannot be affiliated with the

“outside,” or with pure embodiment. That is to say, the reliance of someone with a visual impairment on senses other than sight cannot be thought of as primitive or animalistic since Nancy’s work overturns this hierarchy of the senses. Moreover, blindness can no longer be conceived of as cut off from rational thought. Nancy’s work serves to problematize conceptions of blindness that associate it with darkness, a lack of rational clarity, or the absence of presence since, for Nancy, there can never be any full self presence with the continual selving of the body of extension. Again, the openness that causes this constant process of selving constitutes an imparting of parts or a departure, pointing to a universal openness in which every self is constituted by a departure that opens the body to difference or a state of deferral. For Nancy, rather than immediate presence, there is a spacing that, Derrida writes in *On Touching*, “gives rise to *technē* and the prosthetic substitute” (119). Here Derrida brings us back to the motif of prosthesis examined in the previous chapter. It is with this “thinking of a *technē* of bodies as thinking of the prosthetic supplement that will mark the greatest difference, it seems to [Derrida], between Nancy’s discourse and other more or less contemporary discourses about the ‘body proper’ or ‘flesh’” (*On Touching* 96-97).

When considering questions of creation, Nancy contends that “[t]he world of bodies owes its *technē* and its existence, *its existence as technē*, to the absence of a foundation, that is, to ‘creation’” (*Corpus* 101). That is to say, the body cannot be thought of as something created, per say. Rather, it must be conceived of not only as existence, but as existence as *technē*, which suggests that “a body is never *completely whole*” (101). As such, the body is never, and has never been, completely finished or “totalizable” (101). Again, Nancy challenges, here, any essential integrality of the body since the body is

always (and originarily) in a perpetual state of departing from itself. In this way, Nancy problematizes any idealized “able” body. Rather, according to Nancy’s conception of extension, there is no body that is not already open, spaced, divided, parted, and prosthetic. Furthermore, blindness cannot be thought of in opposition to a vision that allows for some sort of metaphysical integrity, or that facilitates wholeness.

By opening the body to questions of the other and to difference, Nancy’s work problematizes characterizations of blindness as other. As a result, blindness cannot be thought of in opposition to a vision—a vision that functions in the same way as the disembodied “self-touch”—that brings about pure immediacy since this pure immediacy is unachievable in the spacing that constitutes the body. Rather, with his theorization of the body as originarily extended, Nancy foils any possibility of pure self-presence. In doing so, blindness can no longer be considered a state of extension in opposition to pure interiority of visual perception since *every* self is constituted through its extension. Even more important for my purposes is Nancy’s reconception of what constitutes a body. By challenging the integrality of the body, Nancy opens up vision to a necessary blindness.

Chapter 5

Representations of Blindness in Disability Studies

[W]riting, as sign of rupture, as separation or ablation of the utterance from its supposed origin, as graft, as always possible and necessary recontextualisation, is the disabled or prosthetic experience par excellence; it is an exercise in mourning.

- David Wills, "Preambles: Disability as Prosthesis"

Having explored how blindness figures in selected works of Derrida, Wills, and Nancy, I turn my attention in this chapter to three texts selected from the growing body of disability studies literature. In doing so, I aim, in part, to demonstrate how disability studies, for the most part, has not yet challenged its own metaphysical assumptions. But even more importantly, I attempt to undertake a reading of disability studies that takes into account the critical questions I address in my discussions of Derrida, Wills, and Nancy. My aim is to open up lines of communication between critical theory and disability theory. However, this is not a line that only goes one way—merely using critical theory to point to problems in the field of disability studies. Rather, I aim to create a dialogue between critical theory and disability studies in order to find points of connection between the two fields.

In the previous chapters I attempted to demonstrate how embodied life, as Derrida, Wills, and Nancy understand it, does not begin with presence, nor does it ever achieve it. Rather, taking into consideration the supplement or the trace, we must think of embodied life not as presence, but as a necessary departure, a primordial departure that does not follow from presence, but instead precedes it. Drawing on the motifs explored in the first three chapters—immediacy, prosthesis, and extension—this chapter reads Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American*

Culture and Literature, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, and Lennard Davis' *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* keeping these motifs close in mind.

My methodology in this section might be characterized as a “deconstructive” reading of these key works of disability studies in the sense that I attempt to read them in a way that opens them to the metaphysical assumptions they leave unquestioned and I consider the implications these assumptions have for a thinking of disability, particularly blindness. Reading these three texts with Derrida's, Wills', and Nancy's works in mind, I hope to demonstrate that disability studies, generally speaking, understands life as emerging from presence. As a result, disability studies presents embodied life as a natural departure or deviation from this presence. Assuming the possibility of some originary presence perpetuates the post-Cartesian paradigm that relegates disability to the disadvantaged side of the abled/disabled—normal/abnormal, vision/blindness—binary. However, in this regard, my treatment of Davis differs substantially from Garland-Thomson and Mitchell and Snyder since in Davis' work I found a useful way of thinking about subjectivity and, therefore, presence. I point to his work as an example of the ways that disability studies can contribute to discussions of the critical questions concerning subjectivity and presence. After reading these three fundamental works from disability studies, I move to a reading of Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* (1999) in an attempt to bring together the themes and criticisms I explore in the works of the other disability theorists together with a text on blindness. With this achieved, I conclude the chapter with a discussion of blindness and non-dualist ethics.

By drawing on the work of Derrida, Wills, and Nancy, I bring to the conversation of disability the conception of a primordial departure, a departure that comes before any possible presence. With this primordial departure, there is no embodied life before there is departure. This primordial departure has significant implications for disability since the “wholeness” that is associated with presence is no longer the paradigm for the body itself. Instead, the human must be conceived of as constituted by a necessary departure, deviation, prosthesis, or articulation of difference. This makes the disabled body the model for the body itself. My purpose for opening disability studies to these critical questions is not to use disability studies as a foil. Furthermore, by suggesting that the fragmented or disabled body is the paradigm for the human itself, I do not mean to level disability and eliminate it as a particular set of differences. My intention is to point to a difference that is universal, using Derrida’s condition of blindness, Wills’ prosthetic condition, and Nancy’s condition of extension as ways of pointing to this difference. Moreover, I hope to demonstrate the usefulness of critical theory for disability studies when they are read in tandem with one another. I argue that considering critical theory alongside the questions of disability theory opens up disability and blindness to a non-dualist ethics.

Bringing Disability Studies and Critical Theory Together

As far as I have been able to ascertain, little work has been done to bring together critical theory and disability studies—some disability theorists have noted this disparity, Mitchell and Snyder among them (see *The Body and Physical Difference* [1997]). Of course, that is not to say that there have been no critical studies that address disability. However, for the most part, disability theorists who appeal to postmodernism or post-structuralism, generally

in discussions of their destabilization of questions of wholeness and identity, fail to engage with their theories in an extensive way, by which I mean that their theories engage with theories of postmodernism or post-structuralism only up to a point. I think Mitchell and Snyder's reliance on David Wills for their definition of prosthesis is an example of this. In more than one of their books they point to Wills' *Prosthesis* as influential in their thinking about the definition of prosthesis and how they use the word. Still, they do not engage with Wills' text in a way that draws out the nuances of his study and the more crucial questions that he addresses in this text, questions that problematize their own work on disability. I address my concerns regarding how Wills' work informs their conception of prosthesis later in this chapter. Similarly, many other disability theorists' treatment of postmodernism's influence on disability studies suggests that it made little more than a blip in the grander narrative of the history of disability studies.³² Additionally, such texts fail to address the problems associated with the term "postmodernism," a term which my primary critical theorists, particularly Derrida, dismiss.³³ Perhaps this serves to emphasize the usefulness of a study such as the present one that attempts to take into account the

³² Examples of such theorists include Michael Oliver and his book *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* (2009), which is now in its second edition. Oliver notes that postmodernist and post-structuralist theories have been proposed as "the way forward for disablement theory," but holds that "[a]part from the fact that few people could understand them and their relevance, they have failed to provide any socially useful knowledge or insights that could be used in improving policy or service development for disabled people and their emancipatory potential remains shrouded in the mists of their own verbiage" (9).

³³ For instance, the articles in Colin Barnes, Mike Oliver, and Len Barton's edited volume *Disability Studies Today* (2002) generally mention "postmodernism/postmodernity." However, they use it as a blanket term, not identifying the theories of particular "postmodernists." One example of this is Phil Lee's "Shooting the Moon: Politics and Disability at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century," in which he attempts to summarize the "essence of the 'postmodern' contribution" to disability studies (144-45, my emphasis). The assumption that one can locate the essence of postmodernists' contribution to disability studies runs counter to the basic tenets of various theorists who might be classified as "postmodernist."

importance of critical theory for questions concerning disability.

There has been some work coming out of disability studies that takes into account critical theory. One example is Deborah Marks' *Disability: Controversial Debates and Psychosocial Perspectives* (1999). Marks argues that "the analysis of disability raises key questions about the organization of difference within a range of relationships, practices and institutions, around the category of 'intellect,' 'functional capacity,' 'normality' and 'beauty'" (1). Her approach to this argument is particularly interdisciplinary, bringing together the theoretical approaches of the social model of disability, phenomenology, post-structuralism, and psychoanalysis. Her use of post-structuralist theories comes into her discussion of the binary distinction between ability and disability and how the boundaries between them are being called into question by theorists such as Donna Haraway (see 14-15). She also turns to post-structuralist theory and phenomenology in a discussion of embodiment in relation to the question of impairment (see 114-36).

Marks challenges what she considers "to be a narrowing of the discipline's [i.e. disability studies'] focus towards a purely social perspective" by introducing other, primarily psychoanalytic, perspectives (xi). The psychoanalytic approach is the framework that most prominently undergirds her study. She holds that it "brings a new and important embodied and psychological dimension to the critical analysis of disability" (1). This is especially novel given that she uses it alongside the social model. For Marks, studies of disability would benefit from both the "individual" approach of psychoanalysis and the "social" approach of the social model, which she holds "should not be seen as incompatible" (8). Here Marks distinguishes herself from many disability theorists who follow the social model, generally attempting to vehemently distinguish themselves from

the problematic, individualist approach of the medical model, which suggests that disability is in need of medical intervention. People with disabilities are seen as faulty and as an object of treatment. The medical model attempts to give disabled people a chance at a “normal” life. Marks discusses the characteristics of the medical model and the criticisms lobbied against it in her chapter, “Medicine and Its Allied Professions” (51-76).

In texts by disability theorists who engage critical theory, Marks’s work aside, the latter is generally applied to the identity of “disability,” as one might apply certain theories to a work of fiction. Rather, I argue that it is more effective to create a conversation between the two fields, giving equal weight to both. Breaking from this tendency of disability theory to subsume any outside theories into itself, Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare’s (2002) edited volume, *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory* attempts to explore what postmodernism and post-structuralism can contribute to understanding disability and the experiences of disabled people, giving equal weight to questions of disability and postmodernism. They write in response to a “theoretical deficit” that they locate in the literature of disability studies coming out of Britain (1). Crucially, as I noted above, disability theorists who do engage with postmodernism generally fail to acknowledge that the meaning of “postmodernism” is not uniform or unproblematic. While I think the essays in *Disability/Postmodernity* are encouraging a useful way of bringing together these two fields, they fail to address this problematic use of the term “postmodernism.”

Janet Price and Margit Shildrick’s contribution to *Disability/Postmodernity*, “Bodies Together: Touch, Ethics, and Disability,” also brings together the fields of “postmodernism” and disability, challenging notions that a clear distinction can be drawn

between the two (62). They note that disability theorists, generally working under the social model of disability, fail to address disability “from the perspective of the embodied subject” since a tendency of the social model is to remove the body from the equation when discussing “disability” as opposed to “impairment” (62-63). That is to say, the social model does not acknowledge “the constitutive relationship between the embodied subject and the world, the notion that our subjectivity consists in a becoming in a world of others” (63).³⁴ This “socio-material world” is “always already there” between self and other (63). Furthermore, the body, as the social model conceives of it, is understood as a given and plays no part in subjectivity (63). Mitchell and Snyder address this problematic tendency of the social model and seek to rectify it. However, as I hope to demonstrate, there remains in their work crucial metaphysical assumptions that are left unchallenged.

Although Corker and Shakespeare’s volume encompasses the work of an array of theorists and issues from disability studies, such as Janice Leach Scully’s article on the implications the relationship between the molecular model of disease and postmodern thought have for people with disabilities and medical ethics (48-61), and Anita Ghai’s study of disability in India taking into consideration theories of post-colonialism (88-100), the work of Wills and Nancy is ignored. In this chapter, I hope to locate myself within the dialogue that *Disability/Postmodernity* opens up and to contribute to the discussion by expanding on their engagement with Derrida and by bringing Wills’ and Nancy’s theories

³⁴ There have been certain texts emerging from disability studies that are critical of this aspect of the social model and move to a cultural model. See for example, Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić’s edited volume *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film* (2010). In their introduction, Chivers and Markotić note that “[b]y analysing bodies that cultural labels render into ‘problems,’ we have turned to disability theory’s ongoing attempts to revamp the social model and re-incorporate the body into a cultural model” (19). For another text that works under a cultural model see Patrick Devlieger, Frank Renders, Hubert Froyen, and Kristel Wildier’s edited volume, *Blindness and the Multi-Sensorial City* (2006).

into the conversation.

Function of Autobiography in Disability Studies

As I noted in Chapter Two, Wills characterizes disability studies as a discourse of deficiency. In “Preambles,” he writes that a “field that defined itself on the basis of non-integrality would be particularly hard-pressed to locate its borders, to establish what does and does not belong, what is and is not integral to it” (39). According to Wills, this all comes down to a “choice of words to relate to that body” (37). He argues that, in disability studies,

identity is constituted in terms of lack or deficiency; that idea inhabits the very act of naming and again indefinitely problematises its choice of words. Within an organicist conception of the human body—the same organicist conception that defines identity and essence in general and that therefore again brings minority studies back to the question of the body—disability cannot ever be other than deficiency, incompleteness, inadequacy; terms which, within the metaphysics of presence as transcendent positivity, not only are by definition negative, but more pertinently, explicitly connote non-integrality. The disabled are thus by definition ‘incapable’ of identity inasmuch as identity refers to an uninterrupted organic sameness, present to itself in its wholeness and singularity. (38)

He notes: “studies referring to disability begin and end with the question of identity and with identity as question or problematic; that problematic is more explicitly than ever a structural constituent of their definition” (38). Inherent in disability studies is the question of who belongs, who identifies as disabled. As I demonstrate below, Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies* serves as an example of disability studies’ struggle with these questions of identity and belonging.

Before turning to my primary texts, in this section I address the widespread use in disability studies of autobiography and first-hand accounts of living with a disability or suffering discrimination related to disability. Disability studies’ use of autobiography

subscribes to the idea of autobiography as a demonstration of truth, as testimony. Susan Wendell's *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (1996) serves as a good example of this tendency since she opens the text with an account of her own struggles with chronic fatigue immune disorder, using examples from her own life to illustrate certain theoretical points throughout the text. In fact, one of her three aims is to do just that—along with giving a critical account of how disability is conceived of in the West and reflecting on how questions in the field of disability studies coincide with those in feminist studies. One of her primary questions is “Who is disabled?” According to Wendell, the answer to this question is most significant for those whose disabilities are not readily apparent especially since if a disability cannot be seen its existence can be doubted (12).³⁵ Derrida addresses the question of autobiography—or testimony—in many of his works, in one way or another. In *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, a text he wrote in response to Maurice Blanchot's short piece, *The Instant of My Death*, Derrida notes that

³⁵ Wendell notes that many disabilities cannot be communicated to others. Elaine Scarry also addresses this question of communicable bodily experience in her influential study of pain called *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985). Scarry notes how physical pain cannot be expressed to another person through language. Pain's resistance to language contributes to its “unsharability” (4). Integral to this point is that the person in pain has certainty about this pain and those that hear about it have doubt (13). There is a break between the testimony of the person in pain and those who hear it since the truth of the testimony is always in question. According to Scarry, this is because physical pain “has no referential content” and “resists objectification in language” (5).

This inability to be verbally communicated has significant political consequences that are manifested in things like war and torture. For Scarry, it is not only that physical pain cannot be conveyed through language, but that it is “language destroying” (19). She uses torture as an example of this, arguing that torture does not aim to gather information. Rather, it aims (though not explicitly) “to deconstruct the prisoner's voice” (20). In the cases of torture and war, Scarry sees an attempt to deconstruct or “unmake” the self of another. Scarry holds that however real the pain is to the sufferer, unless it is physically visible, it is unreal to anyone not experiencing it (56). That is to say, “though indisputably real to the sufferer,” pain is, “unless accompanied by visible bodily damage or a disease label, unreal to others” (56). Similarly, some disabilities are considered “invisible” in that they are not readily apparent.

“there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury—that is to say, the possibility of literature, of the innocent or perverse literature that innocently plays at perverting all of these distinctions” (29). Testimony, that is to say autobiography, is constitutively haunted by this possible fiction since “[i]f this possibility that it seems to prohibit were effectively excluded, if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony” (29-30).

This question—“Who is disabled?”—invariably involves questions of testimony and autobiography. The “I” that answers this question—“I am disabled”—necessarily assumes a metaphysical position that feeds a binary structure since it establishes a boundary between those who identify as disabled and those who do not. Another necessary element of disability theory’s use of autobiography is what one might call a politics of visibility. That is to say, this “I” of the statement “I am disabled” or “I have experienced some type of discrimination related to disability” is necessarily in a position of seeing and being seen. In a tradition that equates seeing with knowing, from this position of seeing one is able to know the self. Being present to oneself is necessary in order to know oneself as disabled. In other words, the “I” must be fully immediate to the self in order to make the claim “I am disabled.” As Derrida writes, “‘I’: by saying ‘I’ the signatory of an autobiography would claim to point himself out physically, introduce himself *in the present*” (*The Animal That Therefore I Am* 50, my emphasis).

David Mitchell notes in “The Body Solitaire: The Singular Subject of Disability Autobiography” (2000) that disability in autobiography “represents the coordinates of a singular subjectivity” (311). His aim in this article is to critically address the “dangers of

the autobiographical turn” of disability studies (311). “Unlike other disability scholars, those who tend to champion disability life writing as a corrective to the insubstantiality of literary portraits,” Mitchell argues that “the singular pose of the autobiographer of disability derives from literary conventions that need to be queried more vigorously” (312). For Mitchell, disability life writing “tends toward the gratification of a personal story bereft of community with other disabled people,” reiterating “the longstanding association of disability with social isolation” (312). However, I argue that the problem of this singular subjectivity goes deeper than the perpetuation of this association between people with disabilities and social isolation. Rather, the “singular pose of the autobiographer of disability” maintains the assumption that one can be absolutely present to the self. As well, Mitchell’s subject matter is primarily the life writing of people with disabilities.³⁶ He fails to address the autobiographical element of works of disability theory. For instance, Mitchell, along with co-author Sharon Snyder, give a brief synopsis of their own relationship to disability in the preface to *Narrative Prosthesis*.

My intention here is not to suggest that elements of autobiography should not be included in studies of disability. As I footnoted in the previous three chapters, autobiography figures significantly in Derrida’s, Wills’, and Nancy’s texts. However, their

³⁶ G. Thomas Couser examines the rise in the topic of disability being addressed in life writing in *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing* (2009). Couser argues that there has been a rise in what he calls “some body memoirs,” that is, the memoirs of people with disabilities, which are always invariably about a body (3). I do not draw on Couser’s work here since his interests are mainly with the genre of the memoir. My interest is specifically in the way that autobiography is used outside of its genre. That being said, I do turn to Georgina Kleege’s autobiographical text, *Sight Unseen*. However, Kleege dismisses attempts to label *Sight Unseen* as an autobiography. Moreover, her use of autobiography in the text challenges the conventions of typical autobiographical narratives of blindness in a way that is important for me. I turn to her text at the end of this chapter.

use of autobiography differs from that of disability theory since they use autobiography in order to question it. In the case of Wills' *Prosthesis*, he self-reflectively moves in and out of autobiography. He uses autobiography to point to the doubleness of "prosthesis," pointing to the artificiality of what we call "human." He concludes *Prosthesis* by turning specifically to the use of autobiography. He writes: "[a]utobiography, as much as translation, reveals itself here as an exercise in indirection rather than the transcription of a supposed fixed original, a personal life, a foreign-language text" (316). He insists that,

when it comes down to prosthesis, once it begins to deal with the signifying network that I have been endeavouring to follow through here—doubling, substitution, transfer, articulation, contrivance, disorder—then it can no longer preserve the uniformity of genre. That is so well before we begin to deal with complications brought about by a personal or paternal story of a wooden leg. Hence it is only because of the difficulty—the impossibility finally—of distinguishing, here and anywhere else, among autobiographical text, fictive text, critical text, and theoretical text, that I allow the genres to mix. (169)

Similarly, in "The Intruder," Nancy points to the occasion of his heart surgery—*open* heart surgery—in order to perform the openness or gapingness that is constitutive of every self. He documents the "flux of strangeness" he experiences in order to question the state of his "I."

Idealized Sense in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies*

In her extremely influential text, *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson aims "to alter the terms and expand our understanding of the cultural construction of bodies and identity by reframing 'disability' as another culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality" (5).³⁷ According to

³⁷ In their review of *Extraordinary Bodies*, Ernest B. Hook and Bradley William Johnson criticize Garland-Thomson's broad use of "disability" to include any physical trait that differentiates

Garland-Thomson, our interpretation of physical difference is governed by a “politics of appearance” (137), which she sets out to critique. In doing so, she “imagines seeing disabled bodies in fresh ways: as extraordinary rather than abnormal” (137). For Garland-Thomson, within this politics of appearance certain bodies are categorized as “deviant” in a way that allows a culture to reassert its normalcy. To demonstrate this, she turns to American freak shows from the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries, nineteenth-century sentimentalist fiction, and twentieth-century African-American liberatory novels.

Garland-Thomson criticizes the politics of appearance in order “to suggest that disability requires accommodation rather than compensation, and to shift our conception of disability from pathology to identity” (137). Unlike Mitchell, Snyder, and Davis, Garland-Thomson considers the disabled body alongside other minority identities, particularly femaleness. She “introduce[s] such figures as the cripple, the invalid, and the freak into the critical conversations we devote to deconstructing figures like the mulatto, the primitive, the queer, and the lady” (5). She does so by applying feminist theory to questions concerning disability since she holds that “feminist theory’s recent inquiries into gender as a category, the body’s role in identity and self-hood, and the complexity of social power relations can readily transfer to an analysis of disability” (20). Furthermore, “applying feminist theory to disability analysis infuses it with feminism’s insistence on the relationship between the meanings attributed to bodies by cultural representations and the consequences of those meanings in the world” (20-21).

The focus of Garland-Thomson’s study is the presence of “ambiguous disabled women figures within cultural and literary texts in which, for the most part, they occupy

someone from what was characterized as a “normal” body (280). This could include someone who is extraordinarily tall.

marginal positions,” arguing that “[i]n almost every case, the disabled woman figure functions as a symbol of otherness, either positive or negative” (29). According to Garland-Thomson,

[t]he figure of the disabled women [she focuses] on here is a product of a conceptual triangulation. She is a cultural third term, defined by the original pair of the masculine figure and the feminine figure. Seen as the opposite of the masculine figure, but also imagined as the antithesis of the normal woman, the figure of the disabled female is thus ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman. (29)

Garland-Thomson seeks to emancipate these women from their position as other. She writes:

[b]y asserting that disability is a reading of bodily particularities in the context of social power relations, I intend to counter the accepted notions of physical disability as an absolute, inferior state and a personal misfortune. Instead, I show that disability is a representation, a cultural interpretation of physical transformation or configuration, and a comparison of bodies that structures social relations and institutions. (6)

Although Garland-Thomson aims to overturn conceptions of physical disability as “an absolute, inferior state and a personal misfortune,” her characterization of the “extraordinary body” undermines her attempts since her depiction of the extraordinary body and its representational power is connected to the necessary conflict between normalcy and disability. As Anita Silvers points out, “what is normal is thought of have no identity apart from its relationship to its own absence” (237). Referring to Davis’ and Garland-Thomson’s work, she continues to say that, “[c]asting disability as a component of a binary definition construes it as a discrete concept but one that nevertheless is dependent on the concept of normalcy,” which “operates as the superior term on this construal, while disability is the inferior and consequently the repressed one” (237). As a result, “representations of disability necessarily invoke what they are not and so always signify

being in deficit” (237). Although Garland-Thomson seeks to champion the disabled body as “extraordinary,” it emerges from her study as a “natural” deviation from the wholeness of the normal body. Moreover, in her characterization of the body and identity, she recreates an indivisible limit between the body and idealized sense.

One of the primary characteristics of her depiction of the body and identity is a lack of self-distance. According to Garland-Thomson, “feminism’s most useful concept for disability studies is standpoint theory, which recognizes the immediacy and complexity of physical existence” since it emphasizes “the multiplicity of all women’s identities, histories, and bodies” (24). Standpoint theory, as Garland-Thomson describes it, “asserts that individual situations structure the subjectivity from which particular women speak and perceive” (24). Writing within the theoretical parameters of standpoint theory, Garland-Thomson assumes the possibility of the immediacy of experience and the uniqueness of identity.³⁸ However, the implication of these assumptions is that only “I” can know the self

³⁸ As a brief aside, and by way of a rather extreme example of attempts to reach absolute immediacy, I would like to quickly turn to Cathryn Vasseleu’s essay “Life itself” (1991). In this article, Vasseleu looks at the endoscope, a medical instrument that allows the inside of the body (such as the digestive tract) to be viewed on a screen (55). She notes that this technology brings people “face to face, so to speak, with the immediacy of the body’s interior” (56). Where anatomical studies were once seen as morbid practices (and only done post-mortem), the endoscopy changed this. The body can be visualized and interpreted through digital images, thanks to computers and video technology where “the body’s unknown volume unfolds as a framed and flattened topography” on the screen (56).

In her analysis of the use of the endoscope, Vasseleu looks at the role that metaphor plays in the sciences. She does not hold “that there is metaphor in the text of science, but that in the very manufacture of metaphors, images, models, diagrams and analogies, and their simultaneous dismissal as just substitutes for or illustrations of the essential thing, science effaces itself as a figurative practice” (59-60). She holds that there is a connection between seeing something and understanding it. The body’s inside that is seen on the screen with the help of the endoscope is not a copy, rather “it is a simulacrum, an image which is essentially a perversion of the possibility of resemblance” (61). This simulacrum simulates likeness. Vasseleu argues that the body is made up of many texts, of which the biological body is one and science is a writing that

and must be fully present to the self in order to know it. By doing so, Garland-Thomson figures disability as the new privileged subject position. If we take into consideration Nancy's conception of the body, Garland-Thomson presents a body that can put its trust in the perception of its idealized senses. That is to say, as opposed to a body that is constantly "selving," she presents embodied life as able to know itself through absolute presence. By claiming the ability to know the self, Garland-Thomson assumes the possibility of being fully immediate to the self by way of a fully idealized sense. As well, it perpetuates the assumption that embodied life is rooted in absolute presence. Rather, with Nancy's conception of the body as constituted by openness—as a universal imparting or departure—this ability to completely know the self, that Garland-Thomson appeals to, is challenged.

Rethinking Prosthesis in Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*

In *Narrative Prosthesis*, Mitchell and Snyder consider how disability has been represented in literary narrative and the meanings ascribed to it, arguing that literary works act "as commentaries on the status of disability in other disciplines such as philosophy, medicine, and ethics" (1). Overall, their primary argument is that "literary efforts to illuminate the dark recesses of disability produce a form of discursive subjugation" (6). They call this narrative prosthesis. In other words, although literary narrative attempts "to return the incomplete body to the invisible status of a normative essence," this is, for Mitchell and Snyder, a "ruse of prosthesis" (8). According to Mitchell and Snyder, this attempt actually

inscribes on the body particular meanings. However, "to read the biological body as simply the essential body is to ignore the essentializing function of writing, and, in this instance, the body-writing practices of biomedical science" (64).

marks an effort to bring the disabled body under control (6). In a more expanded definition, they hold that narrative prosthesis “is meant to indicate that disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (49). In other words, disability, for Mitchell and Snyder, “inaugurates the act of interpretation” (6), perpetually pointing to something else.

Although Mitchell and Snyder’s focus is on representations of disability in narrative art, their study is still very much a study of the disabled body (see 49). Garland-Thomson points to this connection in her review of the book when she states that, “[l]ike the material prostheses that functionally link disabled bodies to their environments, disability operates to extend and make literary narrative operational” (412). Mitchell and Snyder hold that looking at characterizations of people with disabilities in literary narratives can tell us a lot about shifting views of the body (*Narrative Prosthesis* 51), arguing that disability has traditionally been approached in literature as “a wound in need of healing” (164). Furthermore, according to Mitchell and Snyder, disability is important for the reformation of the opposition between interior and exterior since “the corporeal body of disability is represented as manifesting its own internal symptoms” (58). In other words, people whose bodies lie “outside the norm” are seen as lacking in moral or intellectual content (59). Significant as well is that, even when the disabled figure does not appear, “healthy” bodies are only symbolically effective because of their disabled counterparts (64). Mitchell and Snyder aim to demonstrate that “the problem of the representation of disability is not the search for a more ‘positive’ story of disability [. . .] but rather a thoroughgoing challenge to the undergirding authorization to interpret that disability invites” (59).

For their characterization of prosthesis, Mitchell and Snyder appeal to Wills' *Prosthesis*. They claim to follow Wills' "more varied and less singular idea of prosthesis" which is grounded in his claim that the body is unable "to possess, via the word, that which is external to it" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 8). Although they acknowledge Wills' "fluid notion of prosthesis," they fail to engage with Wills' argument in a way that undermines the abled/disabled binary. They hold that "the deficient body," as Wills conceives of it, "by virtue of its insufficiency, serves as baseline for the articulation of the normal body" (7). For Mitchell and Snyder, prosthesis is an illusion that attempts to erase difference and unable to do so it becomes about "[returning] one to an acceptable degree of difference" (7). This deviates significantly from Wills' conception of prosthesis which opens the human to difference, as opposed to erasing it. As well, conceiving of prosthesis as a means of erasure suggests an originary whole that can be returned or at the very least that embodied life can reach some type of wholeness. I don't think Mitchell and Snyder intend to characterize prosthesis, and disability, as a result, in this way. However, their characterization of prosthesis rearticulates it as an entity that necessarily lies outside of the self. In doing so, they rearticulate the structural opposition between natural and artificial that Wills seeks to undermine.

In their effort "to make the prosthesis show, to flaunt its imperfect supplementation as an illusion," they hold that disability, in the texts that they study including Shakespeare's *Richard III* and Melville's *Moby Dick*, refuses to return to "the land of the normative" (8). This idea of return is significant since it points to an originary presence from which disability departs. It is Wills' argument for an originary, primordial prosthesis that is lacking in Mitchell and Snyder's characterization. By failing to consider this crucial aspect

of Wills' work, they leave unchallenged the assumption that absolute presence can be reached through the interiority of the mind. Furthermore, by characterizing disability as a prosthetic tool used in narrative art, Mitchell and Snyder figure prosthesis as inanimate, in opposition to the animation of the human. Of the disability theorists that I draw on extensively here, Davis is the only one to suggest an inanimation inherent in the human. He holds that "[i]n a dismodernist model, the ideal is not a hypostatization of the normal (that is, dominant) subject, but aims to create a new category based on the partial, incomplete subject whose realization is not autonomy and independence but dependency and interdependence" (*Bending Over Backwards* 30). I turn to his work in the next section to point to a text from disability studies that presents a useful way of considering subjectivity.

Lennard Davis and the Unstable Identity of Disability

Having pointed to some of the problematic assumptions that inform Garland-Thomson's and Mitchell and Snyder's texts, I turn, in this section, to Davis' *Bending Over Backwards*. The book is comprised of nine essays that examine the instability of "identity" and the implications of this instability for identity politics. Reading social constructionist and performative conceptions of the body, Davis queries whether, if all identities are socially constructed or performed, there is "a core identity there? Is there a there?" (13). For Davis, disability can help us to think through these questions since he holds that it "presents us with a malleable view of the human body and identity" (26). While he admits that the essays that make up this text and represent this undertaking, at times, lack coherence, his concept of "dismodernism" remains constant throughout. His conception of dismodernism arises from a critique of postmodernism. I turn to Davis' work for this very reason since, I

think, his characterization of the identity of disability as porous and wavering is a useful way of thinking about the instability of subjectivity. Although Davis does not heavily engage with critical studies of subjectivity—he does point to the work of Derrida, but only in a cursory way, and uses Michel Foucault in his critique of certain aspects of postmodernism’s “identity”—I point to his text as a way of demonstrating that it is not just disability studies that would benefit from an engagement with critical theory. Rather, I hope to point to the contribution that disability studies can make to the questions that concern critical theory.

Although Davis commends postmodernism’s critique of essentialism, he seeks to reinvigorate the study of identity, which he holds is waning. For Davis, arguing that there are problems in the model of identity politics,

the point is that identity studies itself is limited by the necessarily taxonomic peculiarity of its endeavour. 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. (88)

Davis aims “to show that disability can and should sit on the tribunal of identity politics, but [he] also want[s] to show that including disability will not solve the problems inherent in the tribunal in the first place” (90). Although he argues for the inclusion of disability amongst the other minorities, for Davis, disability functions under a “different set of definitions from other current and known identities,” allowing it “to transcend the problems of identity politics” (23). He locates this difference in disability’s “unstable nature” (26). In this way, disability is not just “‘another’ identity to be added to an existing welter of identities” (85). Rather, as Davis conceives of it, “disability is somewhat different from other identities and subjects them to a kind of scrutiny” since it is a “porous category” (86).

That is to say, it is possible to move in and out of disability. People who find themselves abled might very well one day become disabled. And a person with disabilities may become “‘cured’ and thus become ‘normal’” (86). Indeed, other disability theorists separate out disability from other minorities on account of this malleability, including Garland-Thomson and Mitchell and Snyder. In *Extraordinary Bodies* Garland-Thomson writes, “[t]hat anyone can become disabled at any time makes disability more fluid, and perhaps more threatening, to those who identify themselves as normates that such seemingly more stable marginal identities as femaleness, blackness, or nondominant ethnic identities” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 14). Similarly, in *Narrative Prosthesis*, Mitchell and Snyder make the mistake of creating a hierarchy of difference, where disability is figured as *more* differentiating in literary narratives than other minority identities, such as gender.

According to Davis, “the instability of the category of disability [is] a subset of the instability of identity in a postmodern era” (25). Using Michel Foucault as an example, Davis accuses the postmodern subject of being “a ruse to disguise the hegemony of normalcy” (30).³⁹ That is to say, according to Davis, “[t]he universal subject of

³⁹ In *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995), Davis examines how “normalcy” has been conceived of in Western history since the 18th-century. He stresses that disability must be considered a social process and not an object, particularly an object of study (73). Davis is suspicious of absolute categories such as “disability” since it “[contains] within it a dark side of power, control, and fear” (1). His aim in the book is to explore this dark side. He asserts that the notion of disability is a discourse that has been historically constructed and that exists in a dialectical relationship with our conception of “normalcy” (2, 157). In other words, our conception of disability is intimately connected to our conception of what is normal. Disability is a socially contrived concept that is part of a more general attempt to control the body (3).

Since his primary interest is in studying conceptions of Deafness/deafness, Davis addresses the ableist myth that it is the norm for people to speak and hear and questions whether speech and prose are actually “natural”—naturally humans’ original form of communication (17). By conceiving of language as writing and speech (privileging the aural/oral), Western culture has

postmodernism may be pierced and narrative-resistant but that subject was still whole, independent, unified, self-making, and capable. The dismodern era ushers in the concept that difference is what all of us have in common” (26).⁴⁰ To combat the insufficiency of postmodernism to account for the “inherently unstable” identity of disability (5), Davis coins the term “dismodernism” as a way of revitalizing postmodernism, rather than doing away with it altogether. According to Davis, the dismodernist era “ushers in the concept that difference is what all of us have in common. That identity is not fixed but malleable. That technology is not separate but part of the body. That dependence, not individual independence, is the rule” (26). Davis’ conception of the dismodernist identity thwarts any possibility of pure immediacy. He does so by characterizing the self as evading attempts to localize it since his vision of a dismodernist ethics includes “denying the locality of identity” (31).⁴¹ Instead, Davis points to a universal limitation of the body (32). These

repressed any other forms of language (19). Rather, he considers the possibility that sign language was repressed in favour of aural/oral signifying practices (20). Davis asserts that “The myth that needs to be debunked is that speech is somehow closer to writing than sign language” (20). Davis argues that sign language is actually closer to writing since they both embody space. However, I would argue that it is problematic to attempt to ascertain which form of communication is “closer” to any other. In trying to get to the origin of writing Davis overturns the speech/writing hierarchy but only to replace it by another one.

⁴⁰ I think one area where Davis’ discussion would benefit from a more thorough reading of some works of critical theory, particularly Derrida, is in his use of “postmodernism.” Davis’ use of it suggests that the term is uniform and fixed. Rather, as I suggested earlier in the chapter, Derrida is wary about the term and does not associate himself with it. Furthermore, although Davis associates Derrida with postmodernism, Derrida’s theorization of subjectivity is very much in line with Davis’ conception of the dismodernist subject. However, although Davis does not address postmodernism as a fraught term, his work might point to ways of addressing how to bring “postmodernism” and disability studies together. In their article in *Disability/Postmodernity*, Price and Shildrick argue that many narratives of disability “encourage the reader to see the person with disabilities as distinctly other in her corporeal specificity” (67). Rather, they encourage writing *together* (64). I think *Bending Over Backwards* may be a particularly successful attempt to do just that.

⁴¹ I want to point to Ray Pence’s review of *Bending Over Backwards*, titled “Rehabilitating the

motifs of localization and limitation evoke some of the vocabulary of Derrida's and Nancy's work. By conceiving of the body as universally limited and identity as malleable, Davis subverts the equation of disability with a lack of presence.

Davis' thesis also echoes the primary themes of Wills' *Prosthesis* with one significant exception. While, Wills characterization of prosthesis problematizes the notion of a completed subject, for Davis, "[t]he dismodernist subject is in fact disabled, only *completed* by technology and by intervention" (30, emphasis mine). The dependency that, for Davis, is constitutive of the dismodernist subject is a reliance on legislature, law, and technology. Thus, although Davis argues for a dismodernist subject that is inherently unstable, his characterization of the subject includes a prosthetic reliance on external stimuli. The idea that the disabled subject can reach "completion" with the help of external stimuli suggests that there is a "wholeness" or essential integrality that can be attained. In this way, although Davis' argument that every person is inherently "wounded" (30) is a useful way of conceiving of subjectivity, the assumption of the possibility of "completion,"

Academy" (2003), which overtly displays the problematic tendency of appealing to discourses of identification in disability studies, which establishes disability as the new privileged subject position. Pence criticizes the vehemence with which Davis "expresses disgust with 'intelligent progressives [who] simply do not see a connection between racism and ableism'" (494, qtg Davis), stating that, although he admires Davis "for being unafraid of alienating potential allies," Pence has "doubts about Davis' confrontational persona" (494). Comparing Davis to three scholars—James I. Charlton, Nancy Mairs, and Irving Kenneth Zola—who "have lived with disabilities and discrimination," Pence considers their anger "more authentic than Davis'" (494). Pence suggests that Davis' work, particularly the essay "Bending Over Backwards: Narcissism, the ADA, and the Courts" which comprises Chapter Seven, would be more compelling had he "been more forthcoming about what made him, a hearing person, culturally Deaf, and about his advocacy for people with disabilities" (494). According to Pence, "[t]he problem is not that Davis needs to earn the right to be angry but that he missed an opportunity to start the educational project he proposed with crucial information about himself" (494). Pence's criticism exemplifies the assumed necessity of the relationship between disability studies and life writing—that an argument is only the most compelling when it is accompanied by personal reflection.

an assumption all of my critical theorists would dismiss, arguing that the body is never finished or “totalizable” (Nancy, *Corpus* 101), somewhat hinders his argument. That being said, Davis’ study acknowledges many points of intersection between critical theory and disability studies. I think we can draw on these points in order to consider a non-dualist ethics of blindness. Before I do so, in the next section I bring our attention back to blindness with a reading of Georgina Kleege’s *Sight Unseen*.

Blindness in Disability Studies: Georgina Kleege

Having addressed representations of disability in these leading scholars of disability, I choose to conclude this chapter with a reading of Georgina Kleege’s *Sight Unseen*, published in 1999 after Kleege was urged by others to write about her blindness. I use Kleege’s text as a way of pointing towards effective uses of autobiography for disability studies and as a way to bring our discussion back to blindness. The book is comprised of eight essays that “do not pretend to offer a definitive view of anyone’s blindness but [her] own” (5). I turn to Kleege’s text because although her book is full of autobiographical anecdotes—for instance, she opens the text describing the uncomfortable experience of notifying one of her classes that she is blind and that, therefore, they will have to hand in a recorded copy of their papers alongside the standard typed copy—she, for the most part, turns her study away from herself, choosing to focus on the question of vision and what it means to see. That said there are sections of *Sight Unseen* that are largely drawn from Kleege’s own experience of blindness. She describes her inability to understand the nuances of eye contact (see “Here’s Looking at You” 122-38), her relationship with her father whose own experiences with disability—his mother was “a hypochondriac” and he

suffered debilitating asthma when he was a child—shaped Kleege’s experiences early on in her blindness (see “A Portrait of the Artist by His Blind Daughter” 139-63), and a trip with her husband to visit Louis Braille’s birth place in Coupvray (see “Up Close, In Touch” 192-228). However, she uses these anecdotes, generally speaking, to turn the tables on sight itself, “undermining its epistemological stability” (Mintz 161).

Significantly, Kleege does not present blindness in a linear fashion, as conventional autobiographical accounts of blindness generally do (see Mintz 157-58). In her article, “Invisible Disability: Georgina Kleege’s *Sight Unseen*” (2002), Susannah Mintz notes that these conventional accounts reaffirm “the idea that blindness can be separated from the self as an affliction one overcomes,” arguing that “the trajectory of Kleege’s text is in fact deliberately anti-linear, non-progressive, and fragmentary in a way consistent with the discontinuities of both female and disabled experience” (158). In doing so, Kleege does not attempt to present a story of overcoming impairment.⁴² Rather, she seeks “to dislocate her readers, to complicate the grounds on which dominant assumptions about blindness are constructed, and to provoke readers toward a more subtle awareness of the gendered relationship between vision and power” (Mintz 158).

One point that Kleege returns to throughout the text is that although she was declared legally blind when she was eleven due to a condition known as macular degeneration, she can generally “pas[s] as sighted” (12). As well, since macular degeneration obscures her central vision, causing a blind spot in front of her eyes, she retains some sight in her peripheral vision (93) and, despite having few cone cells, she can

⁴² In her contribution to Lennard Davis’ edited collection *The Disability Studies Reader* (2010), Kleege critiques the trope of the Hypothetical Blind Man, a figure meant to evoke awe and pity (529). In *Sight Unseen* Kleege avoids falling into this trope, or the trope of the visionary blind man, the figure who, in losing his sight, gains some sort of extra-sight.

“still perceive colour accurately” (153). Because of these visual abilities, Kleege refers to herself as “imperfectly blind” (150), suggesting “that what sight she has actually debars her from full participation in the category of blindness” (Mintz 159). In this way, it is as if Kleege’s form of blindness positions her in a liminal category between blindness and sight. If we think back to Cixous’s description of her myopic vision, in “Savoir,” she describes mourning her lost myopia as wandering in limbo, between the blind continent and the seeing continent with only her fleeting myopia able to see both shores (16).

Mintz heralds Kleege’s text as an example of disabled women’s life writing. According to Mintz, Kleege’s “suppression of personal revelation serves an important feminist argument, in that it calls particular attention to the dynamics of gazing. Kleege makes *specularity* the spectacle, putting vision itself, rather than her body, on display” (157, emphasis in original). In doing so, Kleege “[unveils] the fictions surrounding sightedness as a stable mode of access to identity and reality,” thereby “subvert[ing] the dominance of myths of knowledge and mastery granted to the eyes” (Mintz 155). Mintz holds that “[k]eely aware of the impossibility of generalizing between various forms of physical impairment, they [disabled women life-writers] refuse to speak for anyone but themselves. In this way, much disabled women’s life-writing maps out a new autobiographical *I*, one that challenges Western culture’s paradigmatic model of singular, will-driven, or consciousness-driven identity” (156). Although Mintz differentiates Kleege’s work from the rest of the life writing done by disabled women, she holds that, in this regard, Kleege follows suit. Significantly, the “I” of Kleege’s text is not part of a broader *we* and she makes sure to note this. That is to say, Kleege’s “I” lacks the universal singularity characteristic of testimony. The subjectivity of this “I” is not repeatable in the

sense that, generally speaking, the testimonial “I” is singular but its experience is repeatable. As a result of this iterability, the “I” is interchangeable in the sense that if anyone else had been in their position—“*in my place*, at that instant”—they would have seen or heard or felt the same thing (see Derrida, *Demeure* 41).

This is not to say that the question of identity is not at issue in Kleege’s text. She introduces the book by exploring her own coming to terms with using the descriptor “blind” to refer to herself. However, by the end of the book, in addition to problematizing the assumption that visual perception has access to identity, denying this access to the blind, she also challenges any possibility of a singular, stable identity by presenting identity as multiple, or identities layered one over the other. This is the case when she first sees her name in Braille; she remarks, “[t]his is me in braille” (218). I do not mean to suggest that there are not metaphysical assumptions that go unchallenged in Kleege’s text. However, I do wish to point to her text as pushing disability life writing, but also disability studies, in the right direction.

Blindness and a Non-Dualist Ethics

In order to open up questions of disability to a non-dualist ethics, disability studies must address its own metaphysical assumptions, namely, that embodied life first emerges from absolute presence. In “Preambles,” Wills challenges disability studies to,

conceive of itself as exceeding, by virtue of its definition and its constitution, the reductivist binaries of human essence and mechanical or technological attachment, of belonging and non-belonging, of competence and non-competence, of eligibility and ineligibility, indeed of articulation and disarticulation. (45)

According to Wills, this can be done,

[b]y imagining, positing or *performing* the idea of an originary prosthetic, an

articulation that presupposes a separation, a disjunction, that relies therefore on a disarticulation, [in doing so,] one might rewrite such oppositions as natural and artificial, animate and inanimate, flesh and steel, creation and contrivance; place them into relations and operations that disrupt or disable the organicist economy of origin and derivation. (45, my emphasis)

This question of performance is key. Turning back to *Prosthesis* for a moment, Wills does indeed *perform* the idea of an originary prosthetic, meaning that “[i]f, as David Wills forcefully asserts, and, more important, enacts on its every page, *Prosthesis* is a prosthesis, if, that is, it offers not just a thesis about the ‘thing’ named in its title but the ‘thing’ itself (which is anything but a thing), then whatever relations it incurs, invites, or initiates ought by that very fact to display this difference” (Kamuf, review of *Prosthesis* 125).

Furthermore, Wills’ project in *Prosthesis*,

would not be possible without that structure of the anecdote, as the elliptic, apostrophic, parenthetical leveller of a discourse, without the possibility of the *anekdota* as apposite to the *ekdota*, without the ensuing attention to what is left in and out, said or not said, published or not, to what is added and replaced, to the doubling of the discourse of the body with a discourse of the mind, the doubling of a text of what is received or inherited with a text of what is acquired. This is the whole economy of prosthesis in operation here. (316)

Unless disability theory begins to perform this originary separation, they run the risk of maintaining the post-Cartesian dualism that relegates disability as other. By trying to overturn this binary, but doing so under assumptions that are inherently Cartesian, disability theory merely reconfigures this violent hierarchy. The effect of this is that the ethics that they put forth is necessarily based on dualist assumptions.

To open up disability to a non-dualist ethics, that is, an ethics that turns this dualism in on itself and opens it up to a necessary difference, a deviation or divergence into difference, these fundamental assumptions of disability studies must be addressed and a new thinking of disability, that opens it up to difference, must be put forth. This requires

opening up these violent hierarchical binaries to the other that haunts it. If we take blindness as an example, by conceiving of sight in such a way that opens it to a necessary blindness, and thereby addressing a condition of blindness that we all share, it is possible to form a basis for a non-dualist ethics. Following from this, reframing our thinking of blindness and disability has significant implications for other structures of difference.

Each of the theorists I draw on above varies in his or her characterization of disability. However, in each one, disability is either lauded as the primary subject position or denigrated as a deviation from a normative presence. Furthermore, disability theorists' preoccupation with identity assumes that embodied life is rooted in a primordial presence. I hope that I have demonstrated that these tendencies pose problems for conceiving of a non-dualist ethics since they all invariably reassert the post-Cartesian binary of mind and body and, most important for me here, ability/disability. Also, these conceptions of disability more generally have significant implications for how we think of blindness in particular. As Derrida notes in *Memoirs of the Blind*, blindness is oftentimes associated with extra-vision, as in the visionary blind man, or with a lack of knowledge or rational obfuscation. In either case, the structural opposition vision/blindness (or ability/disability) remains intact. Although none of the disability theorists I draw on consider blindness specifically in their texts, their theorizations of disability have significant implications for a thinking of

sight and blindness, which I explore further in my Conclusion.

As I stated at the outset of this chapter, by arguing that the disabled body is paradigmatic of the body itself, I do not mean to level disability, eliminating it as a particular set of differences. Rather, my intention is to draw on selected themes of my critical theorists—immediacy, prosthesis, and extension—to suggest an originary difference that is the universal condition of “human.” By addressing the discursive construction of “sight” and “blindness,” I think we can begin to consider non-dualist ways of thinking about sight and blindness in particular, and disability in general. Furthermore, I hope that I have indicated important points of contact between disability studies and critical theory that might be explored. Finally, the psychoanalytic perspective that *Disability/Postmodernity* engages is specifically Lacanian. In fact, Freud does not enter the text. Although I do not engage with Freud’s texts directly in this study, I have highlighted the ways that Freud’s work has influenced the work of Derrida, Wills, and Nancy. Furthermore, in my Conclusion I address in more depth the non-dualist ethics that emerges from this “deconstructive” reading of disability studies.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In this thesis, I argue that some of the foundational works from disability studies have left crucial metaphysical assumptions unchallenged. Generally speaking, the work of disability theorists reaffirms the post-Cartesian binary between mind and body by characterizing embodied life as first emerging from absolute presence, thus portraying disability as a deviation from some idealized “natural” integrality. Although the aim of disability theorists is generally to emancipate people with disabilities from their position on the margins of subjectivity, their methods of doing so, which neglect to address their own metaphysical assumptions, often merely reconfigure the violent hierarchy between mind and body, and thus abled and disabled.

In elaborating this argument, I consult the work of three contemporary critical theorists, Jacques Derrida, David Wills, and Jean-Luc Nancy. By reading three selected motifs—immediacy, prosthesis, and extension—in their texts, I consider how their work suggests ways of thinking about sight and blindness that does not conform to the hierarchical dualisms of Western metaphysics. They do so, primarily, by calling into question the possibility of absolute presence. In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida asserts that there is a condition of blindness inherent in the graphic act. Furthermore, he emphasizes the complicated relationship between sight and blindness, pointing to a necessary blindness in every sight. Derrida explores the paintings of blindness from the Louvre exhibition in order to point to a condition of blindness that we all share. By dissociating visual perception from knowledge and pure self-presence and by suggesting that blindness is not a deviation from sight but rather what constitutes the human itself, Derrida challenges the Western

tradition's privileging of immediacy.

While the concentration of Wills' and Nancy's texts are not questions of sight and blindness, I argue that their works are still important for thinking about sight and blindness in a way that does not conform to the Western tradition's dualist conception. In *Prosthesis*, Wills challenges assumptions that the "I" can ever be read as a whole, integral subjectivity since he argues that the human is constituted by a prosthetic condition. That is to say, the prosthetic origins that are always already a part of the human point to an articulation of difference that inaugurated the "human." Wills' work is significant for a thinking of blindness since, taking into consideration his theorization of the condition of prosthesis, blindness can no longer be thought of as a uniquely prosthetic state, as a lack or deficiency. In this condition of prosthesis, the human, as Wills conceives, is constituted by an originary prosthesis. By conceiving of the human as originally prosthetic, blindness cannot be considered a deviation from some absolute integrality, since there never was (and never can be) any whole, self-present, "human."

Again, Nancy's primary concern in *Corpus* is not blindness, or even disability. However, his theorization of extension and the body of sense have significant implications for thinking about blindness. In his work on the body, Nancy asserts that subjectivity is constantly in a state of externalizing or displacing. As such, the self can never be localized, or called up into immediacy, since it is constantly departing from itself. By conceiving of the body as an openness or a spacing of space and by problematizing the association between the sense of touch and rationality, Nancy challenges the idealization of the senses that is characteristic of the Western metaphysical tradition. This challenge affects a thinking of blindness since, in doing so, Nancy opposes assumptions that equate sight with

self-presence and rationality. As a result, blindness can no longer be associated with ontological deficiency.

Opening up the structural opposition between mind and body, Derrida's, Wills', and Nancy's work suggests that the "human" is comprised of a necessary other. That is to say, in their theorization of my selected motifs, Derrida, Wills, and Nancy point to different primordial conditions—blindness, prosthesis, and extension—that constitute the "human," opening up "human" to a necessary condition of difference. In their reading of these various conditions, all three suggest that the disabled body is not a natural deviation from a "normal," integral body, but paradigmatic of the human itself.

Additionally, my thesis engages the work of these three theorists in relation to the work of selected disability theorists, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, and Lennard Davis. I do so both in an attempt to establish much needed connections between critical theory and disability theory and in order to explore the implications of post-metaphysical conceptions of blindness and sight for representations of, and attitudes toward, the physical loss of sight. I engage these texts from the large and growing disability studies literature in order to make the case that disability studies has not yet challenged its own metaphysical assumptions. Reading Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*, I argue that they present disability as a natural deviation from an originary integrality. Although disability theorists, such as Garland-Thomson, largely attempt to overturn the abled/disabled binary, her appeal to, what I have called, the discourse of identification, presuming that it is possible to know the self through the immediacy of experience, merely reconfigures this violent hierarchy, figuring disability as the new idealized subject position.

This discourse assumes the possibility of being absolutely present to the self through the idealized, interiority of the mind. This is the case since in order to make claims of identification or attain this self-knowledge, one must be in absolute proximity to the self—what Nancy characterizes as the idealized self-touch. By assuming the possibility of total immediacy, the structural opposition between ability and disability (and vision and blindness) remains intact. Similarly, although Mitchell and Snyder appeal to the work of Wills for their characterization of prosthesis, they do not engage with his work in ways that challenge the traditional metaphysical binary. Rather, their characterization of prosthesis as an illusion meant to erase difference fails to address Wills' primary argument, that the prosthetic is the paradigm for the body itself. As a result, prosthesis in *Narrative Prosthesis* remains an artificial entity that lies outside of the human, a means of bringing the human back to some originary wholeness.

That is not to say that there is not work coming out of disability studies that addresses these metaphysical assumptions. I turn, specifically, to Lennard Davis' *Bending Over Backwards*, and to a certain extent Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen*, in order to demonstrate how some disability scholars are thinking about subjectivity in a way that challenges some of these traditional assumptions. Davis' appeal to disability to demonstrate the instability and malleability of identity is a useful way of thinking about subjectivity. Similarly, Kleege's study undermines the discourse of identification by challenging the singularity of identity. Furthermore, she contests idealizations of the senses that assume that sight (or touch) can attain any sort of pure immediacy. That being said, Kleege also avoids appealing to the trope of the visionary blind person that suggests that with blindness comes extraordinary vision. In this way, she denies sight—whether it is physical sight or

extra-sight—sole access to identity and absolute presence.

As I have attested to multiple times throughout this study, my aim in addressing these unchallenged assumptions in disability studies literature is not to use disability studies as a foil. However, since disability studies is still very much a growing field, I think it is crucial for it to address these metaphysical assumptions. Although I think that activism and concerns regarding policy are important, if they continue to function within this foundational opposition—mind/body—disability will continue to be subjugated. Rather, questions concerning disability and blindness matter to me since I think they provide helpful ways of thinking about difference. By arguing for a primordial blindness, a primordial disability, back at the beginning of what we call “human,” I do not mean to level disability. Instead, I hope, by appealing to blindness and disability, to point to a difference, departure, separation, partition, or *différance* at the beginning of the “human.” I think this, in turn, will benefit how we conceive of structures of difference, such as disability.

Furthermore, I hope that I have pointed to some much needed points of contact between critical theory and disability studies. I think questions concerning disability studies are ones that would benefit from the insights of critical theorists. As well, and I hope I demonstrated this in my treatment of Davis and Kleege, I think that critical theory’s concerns regarding subjectivity and the “human” would profit from reading the works of certain disability scholars since disability, being an inherently unstable and malleable “identity,” serves as a helpful paradigm for thinking about the body itself.

I would like to close by considering what difference the critical theory I examine in this

thesis makes to the physical disability of blindness. This is the difficult question on which I offer the following closing remarks. Through the dual reading that characterizes critical theory, my three critical theorists read disability studies in a way that has it open itself to the necessary others that haunt it, thereby revealing the violent hierarchies that it all-too-often leaves intact. In opening disability studies to these metaphysical assumptions, critical theory destabilizes the traditional metaphysical binaries that are left unchallenged. Critical theory is thus useful for the study of the disability of blindness since it overturns the violent hierarchy that serves to denigrate blindness as other. By opening sight to the necessary other, blindness, that haunts it, critical theory, suggesting new, non-dual, ways of thinking about blindness, challenges assumptions of blindness as ontologically deficient. Derrida, Wills, and Nancy conceive of blindness as primordial, as always already constitutive of the human being, and, in doing so, they challenge idealizations of sight that associate it with knowledge and self-presence. They problematize the privilege given, in the Western metaphysical tradition, to rationality and presence, invariably conceived in relation to vision and sight. I am arguing throughout this thesis that the idealizations on which metaphysics rests are what inform historical representations of blindness as darkness, deficiency, and dependency. Challenging the idealist tradition has significant implications not just for blindness and disability, as I have noted, but also for other structures of difference, such as the question of the animal and sexual difference, which I have pointed to at various points throughout this thesis.

Finally, I would like to consider whether or not this new conception of blindness, and thus “human,” might actually change the discursive construction of blindness and disability. If the legacy of disciplines such as feminism can tell us anything, it is that the

critical study of disability still has a long way to go before ableist assumptions and discrimination against people with disabilities is not commonplace in Western culture. However, since one of disability studies' primary concerns is activism, thinking about disability, within its own field, in non-dualist ways and appealing to post-metaphysical conceptions of blindness and sight, might begin to transform representations of, and attitudes toward, the physical loss of sight in other areas, whether they are academic disciplines or popular culture. What I want to emphasize is that crucial metaphysical assumptions must be challenged—within the legacy we inherit and within the field of disability studies—before we can expect to see the effects of a rethinking of disability on a larger scale.

Bibliography

- Barnes, Colin, Mike Oliver, and Len Barton (eds.). *Disability Studies Today*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 253-64.
- _____. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 217-51.
- Cadava, Eduardo. *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1997.
- Caputo, John D. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1997.
- Chivers, Sally and Nicole Markotić (eds.). *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2010.
- Cixous, Hélène and Jacques Derrida. *Veils*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2001.
- Corker, Mairian and Tom Shakespeare (eds.). *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Couser, G. Thomas. *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2009.
- Davis, Lennard J. *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*. New York: New York UP, 2002.
- _____. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. London: Verso, 1995.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham UP, 2008.
- _____. *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000.
- _____. "Freud and the Scene of Writing." *Yale French Studies* 48: French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis (1972): 74-117.

- _____. "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand." Trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*. Ed. John Sallis. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. 161-96.
- _____. *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993.
- _____. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- _____. *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*. Trans. Christine Irizarry. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005.
- _____. *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.
- _____. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*. Trans. and with an Introduction by Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978. 278-93.
- Diprose, Rosalyn. "A 'genetics' that makes sense." *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*. Ed. Diprose and Robyn Ferrell. St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1991. 65-76.
- Diprose, Rosalyn and Robyn Ferrel. Introduction to *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*. Ed. Diprose and Ferrell. St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1991.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Ed. James Strachey. Trans. Joan Riviere. London: Hogarth P, 1963.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Colombia UP, 1997.
- _____. Review of *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder. *American Literature* 78.2 (2006): 411-12.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Hillis Miller, J. "Touching Derrida Touching Nancy." *For Derrida*. New York: Fordham UP, 2009. 245-305.
- Hook, Ernest B. and Bradley William Johnson. Review of *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. *Literature and Medicine* 16.2 (1997): 277-81.

- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.
- _____. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." *Vision and Visuality*. Ed. Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay P, 1988. 3-23.
- Jütte, Robert. *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace*. Cambridge, UK: Polity P, 2005.
- Kamuf, Peggy. "Béance." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 2.3 (2002): 37-56.
- _____. Review of *Prosthesis* by David Wills. *L'Esprit Créateur* 36.2 (1996): 125-26.
- Kelly, Michael. *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Kleege, Georgina. "Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account." *The Disability Studies Reader*. Third Edition. Ed. Lennard Davis. New York: Routledge, 2010. 522-30
- _____. *Sight Unseen*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1999.
- Krell, David Farrell. *The Purest of Bastards: Works of Mourning, Art, and Affirmation in the Thought of Jacques Derrida*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2000.
- Lawlor, Leonard. *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life*. New York: Fordham UP, 2006.
- Lee, Phil. "Shooting the Moon: Politics and Disability at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century." *Disability Studies Today*. Ed. Colin Barnes, Mike Oliver, and Len Barton. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002. 139-61.
- Levin, David Michael (ed.). *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.
- _____. *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1997.
- Levin, David Michael. *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- MacKendrick, Karmen. *Word Made Skin: Figuring Language at the Surface of Flesh*. New York: Fordham UP, 2004.
- Marks, Deborah. *Disability: Controversial Debates and Psychosocial Perspectives*. New

- York: Routledge, 1999.
- McCumber, John. "Derrida and the Closure of Vision." *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*. Ed. David Michael Levin. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. 234-51.
- Mintz, Susannah B. "Invisible Disability: Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen*." *NWSA Journal* 14.3 (2002): 155-77.
- Mitchell, David T. "Body Solitaire: The Singular Subject of Disability Autobiography." *American Quarterly* 52.2 (2000): 311-15.
- Mitchell, David and Sharon L. Snyder (eds.). *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997.
- Mitchell, David and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Corpus*. Trans. Richard Rand. New York: Fordham UP, 2008.
- _____. "Corpus." *The Birth to Presence*. Trans. Brian Holmes, et al. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993. 189-207.
- _____. "Psyche." *The Birth to Presence*. Trans. Brian Holmes, et al. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993. 393.
- Oliver, Michael. *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Pence, Ray. "Rehabilitating the Academy." Review of *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions* by Lennard Davis. *American Quarterly* 55.3 (2003): 489-97.
- Price, Janet and Margrit Shildrick. "Bodies Together: Touch, Ethics and Disability." *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*. Ed. Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare. New York: Continuum, 2002. 62-75.
- Rubinstein, Meyer Raphael. "Seen Unseen." *Art in America* 79.4 (April 1991): 47-53.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Silvers, Anita. "The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Disability, Ideology and the Aesthetic." *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*. Eds. Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare. New York: Continuum, 2002. 228-44.
- Smith, Marquard. "The Uncertainty of Placing: Prosthetic Bodies, Sculptural Design, and

- Unhomely Dwelling in Marc Quinn, James Gillingham, and Sigmund Freud." *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*. Special Issue: The Prosthetic Aesthetic. Ed. Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra. 46 (2002): 85-102.
- _____. "The Vulnerable Articulate: James Gillingham, Aimee Mullins, and Matthew Barney." *The Disability Studies Reader*. Third Edition. Ed. Lennard Davis. New York: Routledge, 2010. 460-72.
- Taylor, Chloé. "Hard, Dry Eyes and Eyes That Weep: Vision and Ethics in Levinas and Derrida." *Postmodern Culture* 16.2 (2006).
- Vasseleu, Cathryn. "Life itself." *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*. Ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Robyn Ferrell. St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1991. 55-64.
- Weber, Samuel. *Benjamin's -abilities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008.
- Wendell, Susan. *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Wills, David. *Dorsality: Thinking Back through Technology and Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2008.
- _____. "Preambles: Disability as Prosthesis." *Derrida Downunder*. Eds. Laurence Simmons and Heather Worth. Palmerston North, NZ: Dunmore P, 2001. 35-52.
- _____. *Prosthesis*. Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1995.
- _____. "RE: Mourning." *Tekhnema: Journal of Philosophy and Technology* 4 (1998). 25 Feb. 2011. <http://tekhnama.free.fr/4Wills.htm>.
- Wilson, Elizabeth A. *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004.