

**A review of
“Disability Theory by Tobin Siebers”
By Ann Arbor**

Disability Studies (DS) has been a growing field of inquiry for quite a while within academia. From Laura Hershey’s work on women with disabilities to James Charlton’s reading of disability as a rights issue to Robert McRuer’s focus on queer and crip cultures as sites of disability to Michael Bérubé’s discussions of disability and theories of justice, the field is as diverse as the bodies it seeks to map. It is also one of those fields that stands as a stark reminder of the gulf between the progressive theories of academia and the lived experience of people the field studies. Media coverage of and legislation affecting those with disabilities do not share the same concept of disability as those who study it. The critical perspectives on race, class, gender, and sexuality that emerged in the past thirty years have had at most a minimal impact on media and public conceptualisation of those identities. Siebers’s Disability Theory (DT) is a game changer within the field not in the usual sense that some reviews use that term to indicate an interesting new perspective on a topic. Siebers actually changes the game. “One of the basic claims of disability studies,” he says, “is that the presence of disabled people in any discussion changes not only the culture of the discussion but also the nature of the arguments in the discussion” (4). He looks back at the history of DS and is not satisfied with the aversion to identity politics in discussions of disability. Identity, though, is thought of as a defect only when it relates to minorities and then is seen as a social pathology. DT is a “deliberate act of identity politics” because it is “the most practical course of action by which to address social injustices” (15). DS is, simply because of its subject, an activist field. And Siebers acknowledges and embraces this work as such: “Identity politics either springs from disability or disables people for viable political action” (14).

The medical model of disability—that disability is a physical feature of the body that impairs an individual and must be treated to get the body as close to the normative body as is possible—is the prevailing concept that shapes the medical community, media, and majority public opinion of disability. DS offers two theoretical challenges to this. First, the structural model identifies disability as socially produced through environmental barriers to normative mobility and interactions. And the minority model makes the lack of equal rights the basis of disability thus broadening the field’s ability to critique unequal access for ethnic-minorities, women, economically disadvantaged, and LGBTQ people. Siebers merges these last two perspectives to approach disability with a theory of “complex embodiment.” This view takes into account the secondary health effects and chronic pain of the aging body as well as bodies suffering from the effects of HIV and AIDS. Complex embodiment opens up the field by offering the intersectionality of identity as a way to analyse social oppression that takes

into account “overlapping identities based on race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability” (28).

Three assumptions guide his reading of disability: 1) the value of personal experience for critiquing social inequality, 2) the particularly powerful effect representations of disabled bodies can have for political purposes, and 3) the importance of theorizing disability as minority identity. With these Siebers points out the major flaw in many identity studies in the past two decades. Just because one realises that disability and attitudes toward it are socially constructed does not undo the detrimental effects of those attitudes and social oppressions. Siebers puts the realisation of constructedness to “practical use” by mapping “as many details about the construction as possible and to track its politics, epistemological, and real effects on the world of human beings” (33).

The most interesting chapters focus on disability and narcissism, disability as masquerade, and a sexual culture for people with disabilities. With these three chapters he accomplishes the mapping of the social construction of identity that he calls for early in the book. Siebers, who himself suffers from effects of having had polio as a child, criticises the use of narcissism to describe identity politics. This is a way to prevent people with disabilities from taking political action. In his chapter on disability as masquerade Siebers examines the experience of individuals with disabilities “passing” for one without any. For disabilities such as deafness or anxiety one can in many ways pass. But Siebers questions this as a politically constructive and favors “claiming disability” as an “opportunity to explore alternative narratives” (119). His chapter on a sexual culture for people with disabilities confronts both the transformation of minority studies by people who define their identity by their sexual orientation and the limited ability of some with disabilities to have “sexual citizenship” (135). The second experience exposes “the fragile separation between the private and public spheres” (136).

While Siebers is focused in his outline and application of disability theory for a new generation of scholars in disability studies, there are two aspects to his volume that leave the reader confused or at least with questions that should have been answered. Firstly, he provides several “dossiers” from print and online sources as examples of the media’s representation of disabled bodies in the public sphere, but he lets them stand alone without much interaction. The reader is left to draw connections that Siebers could link to his theoretical points. Secondly, he critiques the critics of identity politics (one of the main contributions of this book) for their failure to use the realisation of the social construction of identity as a politically constructive starting point. In his critique he uses much of the early work of those like Judith Butler without considering her more recent work on identity, which provides a more complex account of how identity works in the world.

But Siebers’s volume has little else one could complain about in a study

that accomplishes so much by looking again at the way our assumptions about bodies, private and public space, and identity are shaped by factors and social architectures we must be attuned to if we are to create, at the least, environments accessible to those with disabilities and, more preferably, political structures in which one's status as a democratic actor is inextricably tied to one's status as a human. People with disabilities, as Siebers shows, are often deprived of the status of being human because of overt and also subtle structures that exclude them. Paying attention to those, pushing against those, and revealing the ideology of ability as an incomplete political model moves us much closer to the participatory goals to which liberal democratic societies should aspire .