

## Monstrous Offspring: Disability, Decolonization, and Species Membership

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### *Abstract*

“Far beyond the reach of medieval English travelers, on the other side of the Mediterranean and across the great Nile River, lurked a dazzling array of malformed men and hybrid monsters... the headless giants, fire-breathing dog men and shape-shifters of “the East” were not mere fairytale fantasies, nor were they simply... metaphors for evil and sin. Rather, they were flesh and blood beings, reported and illustrated in scientific sources, even though they were located at too great a remove to be personally verified”

Mittman, Asa Simon. *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England*. London & New York: Routledge, 2006, p.11.

The medieval monsters at the edges of the world that were a foundation stone for modern racism are still here, not in the imagination but amongst us. The monster is no longer defined outright by the racialized body (though raced and gendered distrust persists), but by the contorted, differently-abled, or disabled body. Disability is a state of permanent marginalization, or permanent liminality, that marks the disabled as *not-quite-human*, perhaps even cursed, which in social terms translates into a global disabled community that is still vying for species membership, citizenship, and legitimate personhood, despite the claims made for already-achieved diverse societies. Questions regarding species membership links disability movements around the world to the fight for civil rights, queer or LGBTQ+ rights, and other targets for discrimination which are often lodged in perceptions of bodily difference.

In this paper we examine intersecting discourses on monstrosity and perfection, from the social construction of beauty bias and the status often attached to this, to the deviant or

malformed body that attracts judgments regarding competency and acceptability. We query how the normative body is symbolically constructed with what are predominantly surface or superficial contours, and analyze the historical and contemporary demands from the normatively-bodied for continued sequestration of the disabled (as if disability is illness). These demands are offset by counter-demands for social power, autonomy, and human rights.

People with disabilities are *also* caught between different discourses, whether to lead with ability or *dis/ability*. This choice emphasizes what could be viewed as 'normal' and how to be thought of as 'normal', versus the refusal to conform to standards of normality. Whilst there is no single method for navigating the social (able-bodied or not), those with different bodies appear to have just two avenues available: *downplay my difference*, or *make it prominent*, despite the discomfort this may cause to others, and the risk of being categorized with the elderly, small children, or those who are criminal or mentally unwell. Categories of deviance within the social are thus, clustered together.

We also consider the representations of maternal 'fitness' and 'risk', as linked to age, genetics, lifestyle choices, and the corresponding discourses regarding termination of pregnancy, bad birth, and *mother-blame*. Entry to the world is loaded with expectations, presumptions that the 'good' body will emerge at birth, with fingers and toes counted to ten and genitals checked for clear binary sex assignment and confirmation. Condolences, such as *we are so sorry*, are offered to new parents in quiet voices when the baby's body is not perfect. Questions as to pregnancy choices, and birth conditions (such as whether to birth at home or birth in a hospital) are loaded with discourses on danger, risk, and safe practice; precautions which are routinely attached to medicalized standards and expectations which define the limits of parental authority and agency surrounding birth. Stating a preference for a homebirth, for instance, require far more stamina, persistence, and confidence than the new parent might realize. *What if you need a doctor? What if something goes wrong?* When nothing goes wrong, but a child is born with disabilities, the discourses become more complex and the reversion to mother-blame can become theological in nature, as if there must be *something else you've done to deserve this burdensome child*. Discursive figurations and lived social experiences therefore intersect and reinforce each other in powerful and persistent ways, pointing to a need to reconfigure the ideas of personhood that are attached to disabled bodies, and reconsider how disability might be re-thought in a manner which links the *education* of the able-bodied to improvements in the lived realities of the global community of *differently-abled persons*.

**Keywords:** disability, normal, decolonization, difference, race, LGBTQ