Wan on Williamson et. al, Making Disability Modern

As a promising academic field, disability studies is currently undergoing a material turn. The proliferation of scholarly writings about the past and present of disability has increasingly pushed scholars to consider the “materiality” of disability. From the perspective of design history, Bess Williamson and Elizabeth Guffey’s edited collection, *Making Disability Modern*, provides insight into how disability is defined and designed in the interaction between human beings and the material world.

This volume consists of three parts: “Designers and Users from Craft to Industry,” “Disability and World-Making in the Twentieth Century,” and “Making Disability Digital.” The first part begins with Nicole Belolan’s study of physical disability in eighteenth-century North America. As a sufferer of gout, John Lukens succeeded in collaborations with artisans in devising a phaeton, which combated the social model of physical disability as a shortage of inability for mobility. The second chapter explores the transition of walking canes from a symbol of fashion into supporting devices for people with mobility difficulties in twentieth-century American society. The subsequent chapter turns to people with physical disabilities in the expanding American empire. Borrowing the term from disability scholar Jasbir Puar, Caroline Lieffers employs the “Right to Maim” in investigating the relationship between laborers with disabilities and the dominant able-bodied society and imperial authorities during the construction of the Panama Canal. Through the lens of prosthesis technology and its practices, the chapter reveals how American empire’s biopolitics shaped the everyday life of individuals with disabilities at the turn of the twentieth century. Aparna Nair’s study of deafness in British India casts light on the interactive history of imperialism and technology. She “situate[s] indigenous sign language as an innovative technological adaptation to deafness that had potentially more impacts on the everyday lives of deaf Indians compared to imported designs from the metropole” (p. 78).

After examining how imperialism, industrialization, and individual experiences intersect with the history of disability, the second part begins with Guffey’s discussion about the politics of design and disability, followed by Wanda Katja Liebermann’s exploration of its poetics. Through the lens of the design of Het Dorp, a Dutch neighborhood for people with disabilities, and its im-
plications, Liebermann discusses how architecture and accessible facilities have influenced the perceptions of citizenship in Dutch society. Subsequent chapters illuminate the sensory, environmental, and spatial dynamics of disability history. Through examining Modern Chemical Sensitivities (MCS) and its controversial status as a disability in American society and law, Debra Riley Parr's chapter foregrounds environmental factors in defining disability. Likewise, Kristoffer Whitney's study engages spatial access and design. Turning to the early history of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), Whitney contends that the creation of its inclusive space “was a top-down process in which largely hearing educators and professionals designed the campus for, as opposed to with, deaf peers and students” (p. 154). Echoing Whitney's critique of the lack of deaf people's agency in the NTID, Guffey's study of the Japanese walking bag reveals that only a designer with disabilities could appropriately accommodate the needs of people with disabilities.

The volume’s last part turns to the design of digital technology and its influence on people with disabilities. It begins with Jennifer Kaufmann-Buhler’s examination of ergonomics, which states that “messy and uncoordinated adoption of personal computers in American offices resulted in a perpetual mismatch between the technology, the workspace, and computer users,” especially those with disabilities (p. 178). By contrast, Elizabeth Ellesper's study of personal emergency response systems (PERS) discloses “how design for disability may innovate broadly desirable technology” (p. 193). However, the development of technology does not always appropriately accommodate the needs of people with disabilities. Guffey's study of 3D printing and prosthetics shows how designers often suppress input from people with disabilities. The anthology ends with Jaipreet Virdi's historiographical reflections on the objectivity of disability in historical research. Concerned about the limitations of the traditional text-centric approach, she foregrounds objectivity and materiality in renewing the representation of disability in the past.

Regarding the interwoven histories and historiographies of disability and design, this anthology foregrounds materiality in disability studies. The book successfully expands our knowledge about how disabilities are not only defined but also designed in the material world. One important insight taken from this book is a critical rethinking of digital technology. Despite its benefits for people with disabilities, the development of digital technology and its deployment in everyday life hardly gets rid of the predominant ableism. As shown in Guffey's and Virdi's chapters, integrating the concerns of people with disabilities into the design of such technologies helps transcend the bias and discrimination embedded in the trajectory of assistive technology. Overall, Making Disability Modern will inspire historians to deliberate on how disability was both designed and defined in the past. The book provokes continued conversation in the field but especially begs for a wider lens. This should include, for example, more discussions about “making disability modern” in non-Western contexts, especially how postcolonialism affects the performance of disability in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
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