

## Complicating the Disabled Figure: An Introduction

The attitudes we normals have toward a person with a stigma and the actions we take in regard to him, are well known, since these responses are what benevolent social action is designed to soften and ameliorate. By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if not unthinkingly, reduce his life chances.

—Erving Goffman, *Stigma*

In a seminal enquiry into the social processes and cultural discourses that construct and govern society's understanding of disability entitled *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995), Lennard J. Davis states the ill-concealed fact that '[w]e live in a world of norms. Each of us endeavors to be normal or else deliberately tries to avoid that state' (Davis 1995, 23). Permeating every sphere of human existence, as Davis suggests, the concept of normality becomes the determining standard to which all aspects of a person's physical, physiological, behavioural and mental properties and manifestations are compared and judged. With an ideology of normality situated so centrally in Western culture, our lives and identities are continually formed and reformed vis-à-vis definitions of that which could be termed *the normal self*.

What might be a better concealed fact is that those assumptions upon which such a normal self is founded are not naturally given. Normality is not a self-evident label for *the* natural state of the human body and mind, but is rather a social construct that came into being as late as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the emergence of new 'scientific' disciplines and discourses, especially statistics and eugenics, and the industrialisation of the Western world. The institutionalisation of this social construct has meant that our culture has emphasised certain features and traits of the body and mind as definitely human, whereas those characteristics that fall outside of the scope of normality become marked and stigmatised as deviant, subhuman, Other. Contrary to nature that revels in mutations and diversity, the hegemonic ideology of normality—

which, paradoxically, has been naturalised in contemporary society—demands a rigid form of conformity and readily alienates anyone who, for one reason or another, fails to fit within its narrow confines. In this way, the concept of normality is inexorably tied to its opposite, namely that of abnormality.

Within such a dichotomy which these two designations of human beings represent, the disabled person is the most acutely deviant figure in its flaunting transgressions of our notions of how people should look, behave and function, and, as a consequence, disability is always relegated to the very margins of society and disavowed as a mistake of nature. If the normal human being is the product of the perfectibility of evolution and the prosperity of our species, then the disabled one—often believed to have been better off never being born—is a flaw in this process, a sickness of the body, which has to be corrected, cured and normalised. Our culture's anxieties in dealing with disability, however, are not only connected to a concern for the life quality of a person with an impairment, but also, and perhaps even more so, have their roots in the danger of recognition that lurks just beneath the surface of disability's Otherness. Such a recognition, caused by seeing the humanity of the Other and the Other in humanity, threatens to deconstruct the distinction between the normal and abnormal, to cast doubt upon the validity of the ideology of normality and thus also on how we define ourselves as human beings.

Consequently, normality has to protect itself against this threat by continually reaffirming, sustaining and enforcing its validity and hegemony through all sorts of cultural discourses, while simultaneously maintaining the sub-humanity and marginality of the Other. These derogatory positions have also traditionally been manifested in Western literature. Freaks, monsters and other types of deviant creatures—all of whom can be considered disabled to some degree—have notoriously been *objects* of study of literature's normative gaze, so to speak, and have consequently been alienated and stigmatised. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson points out in her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), voicing a general view among disability studies scholars,

[d]isabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting

responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance. (Thomson 1997, 9)

Such literary engagements with and representations of disability serve to emphasise, in the same manner as the Freak Shows of the past, the supposedly inherent and glaring Otherness of the non-normal characters so as to affirm normality and the normal self (an evidently bourgeois project), and in this endeavour rely on evoking responses of fear, repulsion, pity, but never of understanding, in their confrontations with Otherness.

In Jonathan Lethem's detective novel *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999/2000), however, these literary conventions are turned upside down. Here, we are confronted with a story narrated not through the eyes of a 'normal' character or narrator, but by a protagonist suffering from Tourette's syndrome, the manifestations of which impedes as well as aids him in taking on the potent role of a detective solving a puzzling murder case. In itself a transgressive move, the decision to make a disabled character both narrator and protagonist allows Lethem to reverse the normative gaze on disability, so that we instead are presented with a defamiliarisation of normality and a familiarisation of that which we ordinarily would consider Other. Thus he begins to complicate our stereotypical understandings of disability, Otherness and abnormality and question those assumptions that constitute the notions of normality and the normal self.

In its broadest sense, then, this master's thesis investigates the representation of disability in relation to normality and to literary conventions in Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn*. More specifically, it sets out to discuss how this contemporary novel resists the predominant literary usage of disability as a stereotypical entity and spectacle that works to reinforce normative ideology and validate the normal self, while instead liberating a figure of disorder to speak, act and contemplate the world around him. This liberation, it will be argued, allows us to rethink both our perceptions of figures of Otherness but also the naturalised structures and ideologies of reality which we usually accept as universal.

As this introduction may have suggested, the approach adopted in this endeavour is one informed primarily by disability studies views. Founded on sceptical and subversive attitudes towards the meanings assigned to normal and disabled bodies, this field of academic study has given rise to a wide variety of critical historical,

societal, psychological, political and cultural perspectives on our way of dealing with and understanding disability in modern Western society. These perspectives will allow us to discuss and place *Motherless Brooklyn* within a larger cultural debate about human bodies, disorder and disability. Thus the following chapter will attempt to give a concise overview of the dominant issues and concerns of disability studies, as well as introducing the relevant terminology and concepts that are involved in its endeavours. The overview or survey, more precisely, will act as a frame for the subsequent readings of Lethem's novel.

Relating disability studies concerns to genre conventions of hard-boiled crime fiction, the first analytical chapter will focus on how the Tourettic Lionel is perceived and (mis-)understood by his surroundings, but also and more importantly how we might begin to perceive and understand him through our reading of his narration. We shall engage with how literary conventions are both deconstructed and subverted by Lionel's position as narrator and protagonist and how this transformation raises issues about the concepts of disability and normality. Overlapping with and developing from some of the points made in this reading, the second analytical chapter aims to create a dialogue between Mikhail Bakhtin's literary concept of *the carnivalesque* and the portrayal of a life marked by disability found in *Motherless Brooklyn*. In particular, we shall be contemplating how the carnivalesque elements of Lethem's novel allows us to see its countercultural aspects as well as the inherent humanity of Lionel, but also how his disorder is an manifestation of utterly human needs. Finally, we shall summarise the overall points of our analytical chapters in relation to the abovementioned aim of this thesis.

## Theorising the Absolute Other: A Disability Studies Survey

Replacing the adversary of the sovereign, the social enemy was transformed into a deviant, who brought with him the multiple danger of disorder, crime and madness.

–Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*

Gaining momentum from the civil rights movements and the countercultural zeitgeist of the 1960s, cultural politics such as feminism, Black criticism and queer theory have come to profoundly influence and even dominate the academic milieu of the humanities, as well as the political arena of Western society. In rewarding dialogue with especially the subversive concerns and methods of postmodernism and poststructuralism, these in many aspects diverse theoretical and political movements have assailed, along with postcolonialism, the naturalised superior position of the Western, white, male, heterosexual subject with the interest of ending the oppression traditionally suffered by societal groups marked by the ‘wrong’ kind of gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. This assailment is driven forward, in particular, by a theorisation of the body and the processes through which we assign meaning and value to bodies from a marginalised point of view.

While such theorisation has caused Western society to rethink its comprehension of its figures of Otherness and, arguably, begun to obliterate the hitherto fixed power relations between the hegemonic and the oppressed, the absolute Other of our culture, the disabled body, has largely been omitted from cultural and academic discussion, save from medical discourses of pathology and rehabilitation, of course. As Davis points out about intellectual debate in his aforementioned book *Enforcing Normalcy*,

[...] there is a strange and really unaccountable silence when the issue of disability is raised (or, more to the point, never raised); the silence is stranger, too, since so much of left criticism has devoted itself to the issue of the body, of the social construction of sexuality and gender. (Davis 1995, 5)

This silence is not tied to a fact of disability comprising only a small part of society, for, as Davis notes, '[...] in 1991 the Institute of Medicine estimated a total of 35 million disabled in the USA, one in seven people' (ibid., 5), making it the largest physical minority in the country. Nor is it caused by lack of interest in the field, as disability studies has existed since the 1970s. More than anything, the silence has to do with the radical implications it would have to consider the disabled body not as something alien, defective and abnormal, but rather as a part of us—an issue which we shall return to throughout this chapter. It was not until the publication of Davis' book that the silence was definitively broken and disability studies was accepted as a serious humanist field of study—an acceptance marked by the excerption of *Enforcing Normalcy* in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*—and, while it is certainly growing in both status and scope, it still represents the margins of contemporary humanist academics.

Despite this position, disability studies has already been highly successful in raising awareness to its causes, the most prominent of which is the liberation of the disabled body from social and cultural oppression and discrimination and the inevitable isolation and exclusion (the real pathos of being disabled) that emanate from this. From such a shared foundation has flourished a wide range of sociological, literary, cultural, psychological and historical works that fundamentally challenge the way we have hitherto understood concepts such as normality, disability, self, Other and the body, drawing attention to, in particular, the binarisms of abled/disabled and normality/disability which pervade our culture.

What I set out to do in this chapter, then, is to present some of the central issues that these works have discussed, in an attempt to establish a disability studies survey. As with any survey of theoretical movements, it is not meant to be exhaustive but rather suggestive of the dominant arguments, theories, approaches and terminologies within the field and, of course, serves especially to frame the subsequent literary analyses of this thesis. More precisely, the following will present firstly a discussion of the socio-historical perspectives on and background of the concepts of disability and normality with special focus on how ideology determines our understanding of both the impaired and the able body. This will then lead us onto an enquiry into the psychological issues tied to the abnormal body—an enquiry which takes the cultural phenomenon of the Freak Show as its point of departure. Subsequently, we shall turn our attention to

fictional representations of disability, generating an overview of how disability has figured in literature and how this relates to its social standing. Though other forms of representation than the literary may be prominent, too, I shall confine myself to a discussion of literary aspects here, considering that my larger agenda is literary and that the scope of this thesis is limited. Lastly, we shall take a look at identity politics and group identity in relation to the term disability, and try to make clear the political agendas that are part of the foundation of disability studies.

Before we embark on that which has just been proposed, it is important to note that when we talk about disability in this thesis what is referred to is '[a] person with a visible physical impairment (someone with an injured, non-standard or non-functioning body or body part) or with a sensory or mental impairment (someone who has trouble hearing, seeing, or processing information) [...]' (ibid., 1), adopting Davis' definition. The labelling of a person as disabled is, as we shall see shortly, more a result of social and ideological processes than it is connected with specific bodily properties; therefore I shall be making a distinction between the terms *disability*, a socio-cultural designation of non-normal bodies formed by ideology, and *impairment*, the actual physical condition which differentiates a body from our idea of the normal.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Changing Paradigms: Normality and Disability as Social Constructs***

One of the primary concerns of disability studies is to show that the concept of normality, which is inextricably tied to that of disability, does not refer to any universal, natural state of the human body and mind, but rather to a state that has come to be privileged by a specific kind of society due to certain ideological, economic and psychological reasons. As a result of this privileging, the non-normal or disabled body has notoriously held a position of undesirability in our culture, being the direct opposite

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<sup>1</sup> Such a distinction has been made by many disability studies scholars, but the usage of 'impairment' as a neutral word to express the bodily difference of missing, for example, a leg has also been highly criticised, with the argument that it, too, is tied inextricably to historical and ideological discourses (see, for example, Shelley Tremain's 'On the Government of Disability: Foucault, Power, and the Subject of Impairment' (2001/2006)). While I do not dismiss this argument, I have nonetheless adopted the usage of the term impairment to refer to a physical reality as it allows me to conceptualise the effects of social processes in relation to more essentialist properties of bodies.

of that which we have come to accept as the natural state of the human body. In this line of thought, then, the stigmatisation, oppression and alienation from which the disabled part of society suffers originate in the promotion of normality as a notion to which all human beings should conform.

But both normality and disability are, according to disability studies, highly constructed entities. As Davis puts it, disability, just like normality, '[...] is part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances' (Davis 1995, 2). As such, normality and disability carry no inherent, biological meanings which can be fixed upon the body itself; instead they attain meaning through a process in which bodily traits are interpreted as linguistic signifiers within ideological contexts. This constructionist view on disability counters the more essentialist ideas of modern Western society, which are summarised in what has been termed *the medical model of disability*. This model, Martha L. Edwards tells us in an essay entitled 'Constructions of Physical Disability in the Ancient Greek World: The Community Concept', assumes 'that disability is a medical condition that is inherent in the individual and that the disabled person's functional ability deviates from that of the normal human body' (Edwards 1997/2000, 35). From this point of view, the suffering and pain that is always presumed to be a defining part of the lives of those regarded as disabled reside within the body itself, as a disease of the body, and society's role vis-à-vis disability becomes one of medical care.

Disability studies strongly opposes this view, and instead directs its focus on social conditions and cultural ideologies as the real sources of most of the pain and isolation which non-normals must face on a day-to-day basis. In this endeavour, social constructionism becomes an invaluable tool.<sup>2</sup> Tobin Siebers, in 'Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body', phrases its value accurately, saying that '[s]ocial constructionism makes it possible to see disability as the effect of an environment hostile to some bodies and not to others, requiring advances in social justice rather than medicine' (Siebers 2001/2006, 173). Disability and the pathos of disability, then, are social issues to be dealt with, not medical ones. This has been the

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<sup>2</sup> Social constructionism or social constructivism considers social phenomena, such as the body, reality and disability, to be largely inventions of culture—social constructs, that is—and not obvious and natural entities. In this line of thought, our understanding of the world resides more in social interaction within specific cultural contexts than in a material world.



claim of many disability studies scholars who have sought to validate their position on this issue through investigations of how deviant bodies have been perceived throughout history. Indeed, if we investigate how different cultures in different historical periods have looked at and treated people with impairments, it becomes obvious that the social and cultural implications attached to deviant bodies stem from the specific prevailing ideologies of any given time and place rather than from within the body itself. In accordance with this, the whole idea of a normal and an abnormal body can be traced and revealed as social constructs coming into being as late as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In Edwards' aforementioned essay, she makes an effort to create an overview of physical impairments and their implications in ancient Greece from those few historical sources that exist. She rationalises that, in a world without vaccines and antibiotics and where war was a frequent occurrence, physical impairments had to be a common phenomenon. However, such impairments, she argues, did not entail the same stigmatising and alienating consequences as they do today. For although being impaired would have made life difficult in many ways, it did not in itself render a person helpless and dependent on other people, unless the impairment was so severe that the individual was physically unable to carry out his job; thus physical handicaps did not exclude people from the workforce and, as such, did not equal poverty (Edwards 1997/2000, 37-39). In this way, a person's economic and social standing was not affected by appearance.

This is also reflected in the inclusion of impaired people in the military. Edwards tells us that '[t]he ultimate measure of a Greek man's worth and stance in his community was his capacity to participate in the military' (ibid., 39); and while physical impairments naturally would have hindered some from participating fully in military service, they were not reasons for exclusion. Quite the contrary, Edwards demonstrates how the Greek military made use of all kinds of impaired people in different roles, depending on the individual's abilities and weaknesses (ibid., 39-41). Impairments, then, did not render a person worthless in the eyes of society, which Edwards also concludes in her essay:

Overall, we see people with a wide variety of physical handicaps participating in a wide variety of social, economic, and military roles. People with even the most severe handicaps were integrated into communities that accommodated all ranges of ability. [...]. There is no indication that people with physical handicaps in the ancient Greek world identified themselves or were identified as a distinct minority group, as is the case today. (ibid., 44)

That people with impairments were not recognised as a distinct group and excluded from society and societal duties has its roots in an ideological approach to understanding the human body which is very dissimilar to the one in place in modern Western societies. Edwards notes that there existed no such category or label as *disabled* in ancient Greece, and Davis, in *Enforcing Normalcy*, stresses the point that there was no such thing as a normal/abnormal paradigm in relation to which bodies was evaluated.

What existed instead, he argues, was a tradition of ideal and non-ideal bodies (Davis 1995, 24-25). The ideal body, however, cannot be found in the realm of humans, but is rather what Davis calls a *mytho-poetic* entity, existing only in artistic representations of divine creatures, such as the statues of the nude Venus or the legend of Helen of Troy. Davis points out that the logical consequence of this is that

[t]his divine body, then, this ideal body, is not attainable by a human. The notion of an ideal implies that, in this case, the human body as visualized in art or imagination must be composed from the ideal parts of living models. These models individually can never embody the ideal since an ideal, by definition, can never be found in this world. (ibid., 25)

It follows from this that *all* human bodies, impaired or not, are non-ideal per definition and, as such, all share a label of imperfection. With the ideal body being an unattainable divine entity, societies had, Davis tells us, '[...] no demand that populations have bodies that conform to the ideal' (ibid., 25). This means, of course, that impairments were less visible or rather less focused upon than in modern Western culture, since they were not recognised as the stigmatising marks of abnormality as they are today. In cases of children born with severe impairments, the Greeks often understood such childbirths as

omens from the gods, promising disasters, and while this may have objectified and stigmatised the impaired child to some degree, it did not exclude the child from the chain of beings: it had a clear socio-cultural purpose, although this consisted mostly in causing awe and terror. It would seem, then, that in ancient Greece impairments did not lead to alienation and isolation from society, but were accepted—in all but the severest cases—as part of inevitable human imperfection. This is not to say that ancient Greece was a haven for people with impairments;<sup>3</sup> everyday life may indeed have been a hard struggle for some. However, with the absence of any rigid rules or norms of bodily form to which the population had to conform, there existed a much greater acceptance of bodily difference and variety than in modern times.

This acceptance of bodily difference gradually became extinct as the Western world began to shape and embrace the ideology of normality in the historical contexts of the Enlightenment Period and the Industrial Revolution. In this era, science and reason supplanted religion as the authoritative discourse and grand narrative of our culture, and through this new secular and scientific perspective humanity and the human form was explained and defined anew, now as purely physiological-biological entities. It is out of this scientific and secular approach to the human body that the notion of a *normal* human being arose. Perhaps the most influential source of this notion, Davis recognises, is the scientific branch of statistics, which was initially, in the early modern period, intended as a political instrument, but quickly ‘[...] migrated from the state to the body when Bisset Hawkins defined medical statistics in 1829 [...]’ (ibid., 26). Belonging to this latter tradition of statistics, the Belgian Adolphe Quetelet began to identify the average features of the human species using mathematical tools,<sup>4</sup> and on the basis of these he created the concept of *l’homme moyen*, the average man, in 1842. This concept—consisting of the average moral features, *l’homme moyen morale*, as well as the physical ones, *l’homme moyen physique*—was embraced enthusiastically in the rising bourgeois societies of the period, as it seemed to promote and validate the middle way of life for which these societies stood. Thus *the average man*, which today has

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<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Edwards concedes that impairment often was equated with ugliness but ‘[...] quite different from the institutionalized horror of physical impairment that is so lavishly reflected in the media today’ (Edwards 1997/2000, 43). Moreover, ancient Sparta is also known for practising an early form of eugenics in relation to children born with severe impairments, insofar as they were isolated from the rest of the world and left to die.

<sup>4</sup> For a more exhaustive elucidation of this, see the chapters ‘Constructing Normalcy’ in Davis 1995 and ‘Constituting the Average Man’ in Thomson 1997.

developed into the normal human being, was situated and institutionalised as a cultural standard of humanity.

Unlike the ideal body of the ancient Greek culture, this standard more or less demands conformity among the populations submitted to it—paradoxically, as an average almost always is made up of non-average features—lest they should be deemed and categorised as abnormal or deviant. In this way, the construction of the average man also meant the construction of its unwanted counterpart, the abnormal man. Thomson argues a similar case in *Extraordinary Bodies* when she states that the average man ‘[...] laid the theoretical groundwork for scientific norms that define our modern concept of deviance’ (Thomson 1997, 63-64). What the construction of the average man resulted in, then, was a new ideology of the body—an ideology based on the binary oppositions of normal/abnormal. This shift in paradigm is also illustrated by the fact that the words ‘normal,’ ‘normalcy,’ ‘normality,’ ‘norm,’ ‘average’ and ‘abnormal’ all originate in the period 1840-1860, dating, as Davis argues, ‘[...] the coming into consciousness in English of an idea of ‘the norm’ [...]’ (Davis 1995, 24).

Within this line of thought, the various types of impaired bodies stand out as the most flaunting examples of deviance with their missing limbs, ‘mad’ behaviours and other non-conforming features. These deviances, which in former times were recognised as personal traits and largely accepted within the social order, now become synonymous with a sort of sub-humanity, and, as a consequence, result in exclusion from society proper. The industrialisation of Europe further served to exclude the impaired body from society inasmuch as it, in a large scale, replaced self-employment and agriculture with wage labour in factories, which were by no means accommodated to people with impairments. Thus, people with impairments, who had been able to support themselves in other historical periods, were largely excluded from the workforce and cast into poverty because of this development.<sup>5</sup> This change in economic standing also means that the impaired body becomes the disabled body, insofar as it is not productive, in a capitalist sense, within the new work environments that industrialisation brought about. With productivity and working capacity being perhaps the most vital aspects in this new form of society, the inability of the impaired body to take part of the workforce outlines

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<sup>5</sup> Poverty is still the reality that most people with impairments must face today, illustrated by the fact that 69.1 per cent of ‘[...] disabled individuals in the United States live below the poverty line [...]’ (Mitchell and Snyder (eds.) 1997/2000, 4).

it as acutely disabled, and forces it to the very margins of society. However, as should be evident, this disabling is not immanent in the body itself, since, as Thomson tells us, '[...] the limitations disabled people experience result more often from interaction with a social and physical environment designed to accommodate the normate body' (Thomson 1997, 46).<sup>6</sup> As such, disability is a social construct that arises as the inevitable contrast to the standards of *the normal* or *average man* and *the able worker*.

The cultural marginalisation and exclusion of the impaired body brought about by Quetelet's statistics and the social changes in the wake of industrialisation is also connected with the ideas of eugenics, which gained ground in Europe and USA in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 'Abortion and Disability: Who Should and Who Should Not Inhabit the World?' (1990/2006), Ruth Hubbard informs us that the term eugenics was first defined by Charles Darwin's cousin Frances Galton, in 1883, as

a brief word to express the science of improving the stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man [*sic*], takes cognizance of all the influences that tend in however remote a degree to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have. (Galton quoted in Hubbard 1990/2006, 94)

Clearly informed by Darwinism, the 'science' described here allied itself with statistics in identifying desired and undesired human traits and features as part of a larger agenda of actively ridding the human stock of various forms of 'defects,' which were seen as threatening to the continued superiority and prosperity of our species. What eugenics set out to do, then, was to ensure the survival of the normal man and the extinction of those outside the scope of normality, those who were deemed to corrupt the great potential of humanity.

As eugenicists succeeded in spreading their message that all sorts of social maladies resided in this corruption, in flawed or inferior biology, that is, the desire to improve the human stock quickly became of national and political interest in the Western part of the world. The most complete melting together of eugenics, politics and

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<sup>6</sup> Thomson defines *normate* as '[...] the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries' (Thomson 1997, 8). That is, *normate* refers to the unmarked and thus superior position of normality, created by the marking of wide varieties of human difference as abnormality.

policies we find, of course, in Germany under the regime of Hitler. Hubbard stresses that German racial hygiene, which the Nazis employed in World War II to kill millions of people, was stimulated by much the same theories and views as English, American and other Western eugenicists—concerns

(1) that humane care for people with disabilities would enfeeble the “race” because they would survive to pass their disability on to their children; (2) that not just mental and physical diseases and so-called defects, but also poverty, criminality, alcoholism, prostitution, and other social problems were based in biology and inherited; and (3) that genetically inferior people were reproducing faster than superior people and would eventually displace them. (Hubbard 1990/2006, 95)

Being spurred on by these convictions, the Nazis wanted to cure the German people and release it from the claws of poverty, which had had a firm grip for so long, by eradicating ‘defective’ and inferior persons, such as the disabled. With a healthy nation as the goal, the Nazi endeavours started off with the termination and sterilisation of people deemed disabled and ended in, as Hubbard reminds us, outright genocide ‘[...] of Jews, gypsies, communists, homosexuals, and other “undesirables”’ (ibid., 98). The German case highlights how the cultural position of the impaired body alters from being one of personal difference, to one of inferiority and then, finally, to one of national ‘enemy.’ While the Nazis carried the eugenics ideology to an extreme which the rest of the Western world did not imitate, the condemnation of the impaired body inherent in the German version of eugenics was largely shared by those countries it fought in the war. It became a common belief, as Davis phrases it, that ‘[i]f individual citizens are not fit, if they do not fit into the nation, then the national body will not be fit’ (Davis 1995, 36).

This new position of and approach to the impaired body—the unfit body, as it were—also mark its entry into the medical discourse: while impairments were recognised either as personal features or signs from the gods in pre-Enlightenment times, they now become diseases of the body or mistakes of nature, and thus have to be treated, cured and/or eradicated. Transforming the impaired body into first and foremost a medical entity, these designations profoundly shape the way we relate to people with disabilities today. Whereas the label of *mistake of nature* bereaves the impaired body of

meaning and fundamentally makes it absurd, insofar as it is not supposed to exist, the notion that impairments are diseases makes the impaired body pitiful. Hence, in the words of Davis,

[t]he average, well-meaning ‘normal’ observer feels sorry for [the] disabled person, feels awkward about relating to the person, believes that the government or charity should provide special services, and gives thanks for not being disabled (as in ‘I cried that I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet’). (ibid., 1-2)

The social constructs of normality and disability and their historical contexts, then, have greatly contributed to the isolation and marginalisation of people with impairments from society, and the transformation of the deviant body from an expression of human difference into a repulsive and subhuman entity, which is, by all means necessary, to be normalised.

### ***The Freak Within: Repression, Recognition and Identity***

Evoking emotions from awe, fear and wonder—with emphasis on their theological connotations—to pity, repulsion and anxiety—results of its pathologisation in the modern world—, the disabled body stands out as the most absolute figure of Otherness in our culture. In its flaunting, predominantly visual, disruption and violation of wholeness, rationality and autonomy, it at once challenges and sustains the understandings we have come to adopt about human physiology, behaviour and appearance. As such, the category of disability is reserved for those ‘unfortunate’ souls from whom we ‘normal’ observers see ourselves as most different. However, such a dichotomy of us/them or abled/disabled ultimately serves only to conceal the uncomfortable truth that we could all, at any given time and place, become disabled and thus transgress the seemingly insurmountable border between us and them, between self and Other. Disability studies draws attention to this border as an illusory distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that works to enforce and protect the hegemony of the constructs of normality and the normal self which we have just discussed.

An obvious argument which disability studies employs in this endeavour is that only a relatively small percentage of people with impairments are actually born with these impairments. Davis, among many other scholars, points out this fact:

Only 15 percent of people with disabilities are born with their impairments. Disabilities are acquired by living in the world, but also by working in factories, driving insufficiently safe cars, living in toxic environments or high-crime areas. (Davis 1995, 8)

Recognising the majority of disabilities as results of living and working rather than congenital or inherited diseases fundamentally unsettles the absolute distinction between abled/disabled and normal/abnormal, inasmuch as it reveals us all to be potentially disabled. In fact, we will all certainly become disabled, as Thomson also stresses (Thomson 1997, 14), if we live long enough. Old age inevitably brings with it considerable reduction in body functions—it slowly disables us, in other words—and, as such, shows that disability is the latent destiny of all presently able bodies. The disabled body in this sense becomes a *memento mori*, an unwanted reminder of the inescapable vulnerability of our bodies, which necessitates its isolation from society lest we should be confronted with the lies of our fantasy of the body as, in Thomson's words, '[...] a stable, neutral instrument of the individual will' (ibid., 42)—a fantasy which is perhaps most visible in American liberal individualism.

It would seem, then, that the isolation suffered by many people classified as disabled pertains, to some degree, to the insecurity they evoke in us about our selves and our bodies. As Hubbard argues,

[p]eople shun persons who have disabilities and isolate them so they will not have to see them. They fear them as though the disability were contagious. And it is, in the sense that it forces us to face our own vulnerability. (Hubbard 1990/2006, 93)

If the impaired, crippled, disabled figure is not quintessentially Other, if it is not the antithesis of all that we are, but instead an integral part of all of us, then the idea of the normal human being—the standard by which we are measured—must necessarily be nothing more than a fantasy. That the disabled body questions the very essence of how



we define ourselves, Thomson notes, makes it more threatening to normality than other marginal identities:

That anyone can become disabled at any time makes disability more fluid, and perhaps more threatening, to those who identify themselves as normates than such seemingly more stable marginal identities as femaleness, blackness, or nondominant ethnic identities. (Thomson 1997, 14)

In this way, sustaining the hegemony of the normal body essentially depends on forcing disability to the very margins of society, on concealing the fact that it lies dormant within each and every one of us.

While it is true that we in general shun people with disabilities and isolate them, it is also a fact that deviant bodies have notoriously been on display in our culture. The most extravagant examples of this are, of course, the spectacles of the Freak Show and Side Show—historical sites to which disability studies frequently turns to problematise and explain the ambiguous position of the impaired body in modern culture. These shows, which had their heyday from 1835 to 1940 in the USA, usually belonged to carnivals and a carnival culture which confronted more profound and ideologically infused issues than entertaining the American crowds. In *American Carnival: Seeing and Reading American Culture* (2001), Philip McGowan persuasively argues that this carnival culture and its expositions were ‘[...] stages for the consolidation of national identity’ (McGowan 2001, 21). Putting Otherness and exoticism on display in ways that were supposed to outline their inherent inferiority, carnivals were fundamentally involved in enforcing and legitimising the superiority of the white, bourgeois subject and in situating it as the norm of society.

In this negotiation of cultural and national identity, the Freak Show played an important role. They presented the public with a ‘controlled’ environment where it could come face-to-face with its antithesis, *the freak of nature*—an encounter designed to give the American people a collective idea of its identity by showing it what it most definitely was not. The success of such encounters depended on presenting and exhibiting the freaks—who were usually people whom we today would describe as disabled and impaired, at least apart from the hoaxes and those whose difference lay entirely in their non-European ethnicity—in such a way that they became pure deviance.

That is, the humanity of the people on display was erased by focusing entirely on the specific bodily trait or traits that set them apart from normality. Thomson describes the scenario of exhibiting freaks thus:

[...] the elevated freak platform—sometimes, particularly in circuses, it was a pit instead—held the observer’s gaze like a magnet, not only foregrounding the body on display, but exposing it in such a way that the physical traits presented as extraordinary dominated the entire person on exhibit. (Thomson 1997, 60-61)

Staging the freaks in this constructed way ensured that the ‘normal’ visitors assumed the superior role of observer, whereas the bodies on display inevitable became objects of the normative gaze or stare. These positions were further reinforced by various narratives that advertised or accompanied the Freak Show and by a pitchman’s spell-binding spiel about the extraordinariness of the observed, such as the following example which is recalled by Leslie Fiedler in his *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (1978):

*Jo-Jo, the Dog-faced boy, that ghost of a voice keeps saying, the greatest an-thro-po-log-i-cal mon-ster-os-i-ty in captivity. Brought back at great expense from the jungles of Bary-zil. Walks like a boy. Barks like a dog. Crawls on his belly like a snake.* (Fiedler 1978/1993, 22; original italics)

This quote reveals a lot about how the Otherness of the freaks was maintained and validated. First of all, the pitchman describes the boy as being something in-between human and animal, originating in the uncivilised jungle in exotic Brazil. Emphasising the beast in the boy—both physiologically but also in regards to behaviour—erases his humanity: he becomes more body than person,<sup>7</sup> and, as such, is not to be identified with—an impression which is further encouraged by the word *monstrosity* and the need for him to be kept in captivity. The second ‘trick’ at work here is the authentication of the boy’s sub-humanity in science. *Anthropology* and *monstrosity* are conjoined both to

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<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on the disabled as being pure body also makes them into erotic objects, although always in a repressed form, and the audience’s stare accordingly becomes infused with erotic curiosity, in line with Freud’s general understanding of the gaze. The repressed form of this eroticism, however, turns the sexuality of disabled bodies into perversion.

illustrate that Jo-Jo defies the definition of a human being and to validate his existence as a freak in the master discourse of science. Relying on the prevailing belief in science to produce universal truth, the audience is seduced to see the Otherness of the freak as unquestionable.

The constructed staging of freaks, then, created a place where the ideology of normality could affirm its naturalness, a necessity since, as has already been mentioned, the border between normal/abnormal is fluid and illusory. 'Normality,' in the words of Davis, 'has to protect itself by looking into the maw of disability and then recovering from that glance' (Davis 1995, 48). As such, the Freak Shows had a culturally therapeutic function. Fiedler agrees with this, remarking about the Freak Show that '[a] Victorian institution it is, like Victorian nonsense, intended to be finally therapeutic, cathartic, no matter what initial terror and insecurity it evokes' (Fiedler 1978/1993, 31). More than just pointing to the therapeutic effects of observing the Otherness in a stage that conceals its essential human aspects, this quote also admits that those extraordinary bodies on the platform or in the pit had the capacity to make onlookers feel insecure and horrified. The origins of these feelings are perhaps best explained by Sigmund Freud's concept of *the uncanny*. According to Freud, '[t]he uncanny is that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar', which means that it is '[...] nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (Freud 1919/2001, 930 and 944). Accordingly, the repression of the vulnerability of the human body inevitably makes an uncanny spectacle of the disabled body, inasmuch as it tells a different yet familiar truth about our flesh and bones than the one to which we swear.

But it is not only the vulnerable body of which the disabled body becomes a reminder; its fragmented and incoherent appearance—results of misshaped, missing or too many limbs, severe scarring or the like—and its uncontrolled movements—caused by mental conditions, for example—also point to another repressed truth concerning wholeness and self. If we accept Jacques Lacan's influential theory about *the mirror stage*, then we also recognise that a child's first impression of itself is not marked by a sense of wholeness but, quite the contrary, by one of fragmentation, grounded in its experience of the body as unyielding and uncontrollable. This experience is contrasted

with the wholeness of the body which the child identifies with in the mirror, before retaining full control of its bodily movements, and results in a tension in regard to how the child is to perceive itself. Finally this tension is resolved by repressing the fragmented body and identifying with the whole one. However, this visual identification is ultimately a fantasy, as it does not correspond to the ontological realities of the body, and in this way the child is alienated from itself (Lacan 1949/1977). Hence, facing the attractions of the Freak Show and their disruption of wholeness and of the body as a yielding instrument of the mind creates in the audiences a sense of the uncanny pertaining to an encounter with an image of a more primal, repressed self. This is what Davis means when he says that '[...] the disabled person, particularly the disabled person who is missing limbs or body parts, will become in fantasy visual echoes of the primal fragmented body—a signifier of castration and lack of wholeness' (Davis 1995, 140).

Whilst the uncanniness here may be primarily evoked by the type of disabled persons whom Davis describes above, other impairments or deviances may give rise to other insecurities in the beholder. The different kinds of freaks, as Fiedler notes, speak to our primordial fears—primarily confronted and then repressed in childhood—about scale, sexuality, the distinction between man and beast, distinction between self and Other and so forth. Dwarfs and giants, for example, become reminders of our childhood anxieties about conforming to a normal size, whilst hermaphrodites may bring to mind issues of gender confusion and sexual identity. As such, the freaks represent the freak within, or what Fiedler calls 'images of the secret self', and challenge the assumptions on which the normal self is erected. The success of the Freak Show, then, necessarily relied on the onlooker to displace or project his anxieties about himself and his normality onto the freaks and recover from any form of recognition to finally condemn the freaks and their physiology as ultimately Other.

### ***One-dimensional Representation: The Disabled Figure in Literature***

If the Freak Show was guilty of exhibiting the disabled body in ways that served a normative end, so too literature has portrayed it stereotypically with focus on its

Otherness. That is, in the rare cases that disability has figured centrally in literature. For literature and other modes of representation (apart from medical discourses) have largely reflected the tendency of our culture to omit and silence experiences located in and narrated from a physically different body.<sup>8</sup> This becomes an important concern for disability studies as the potential of literature to both call attention to and help undo social injustice and, at the same time, to uphold and reproduce existing cultural ideologies makes it a potentially valuable tool for enhancing society's understanding of what it means to be disabled and what roles specific surroundings play in such a life, but also potentially a site of stigmatisation, alienation and marginalisation. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder express a similar view on the influence of representation in the anthology *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, when they say that literature can be '[...] both a utilitarian tool of transformation and a medium for further stigmatizing disability in the imagination of its audience' (Mitchell and Snyder (eds.) 1997/2000, 13).

If we accept that literature indeed possesses such capabilities, then it would be obvious to presume that these are tied to its mimetic relations with the world that surrounds it. The mimetic dimensions of any literary work are as much influenced by cultural ideology as they are grounded in any natural, objective reality—that is, they represent a world view more than they represent the world *per se*—and this, Thomson argues, enables fiction not only to represent reality, but also to '[...] shape our perceptions of the world, especially regarding situations about which we have little direct knowledge' (Thomson 1997, 10). As disability is a phenomenon with which many of us have no direct contact—and as such about which we have little direct knowledge—, literature's, as well as other media's, way of representing and portraying disability plays a defining role in our comprehension of it. The problem is, as already mentioned, that literature has almost exclusively used characters with disabilities as spectacles of Otherness, reiterating and reinforcing the isolating views that already pervade in society. Accordingly, the impaired body is almost always to be found on the periphery of literature as a mirror for the non-freakish, serving much the same needs as did the Freak Show. As we have seen Thomson note in the introduction,

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<sup>8</sup> The Freak Show may have put bodies with impairments on display and, as such, did not omit them, but it did not narrate their experiences; it rather silenced them both figuratively and literally in this respect since its fictions were normative.

[d]isabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance. Indeed, main characters almost never have physical disabilities. (ibid., 9)

Disability, in other words, exists in literature in order to evoke pity, compassion, fear, repulsion and awe, which makes disabled characters more symbols or effects than characters in their own right (consider, for example, Dickens's helpless Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), whose whole character seems to be created so as to arouse pity in the reader).

This simplicity and flatness of character stands in contrast to the complexity and depth of more important literary figures, and thus limit the positions a character with disabilities can assume in fiction. While one-dimensional representation makes it impossible for the body impaired to be that of a protagonist, it readily and frequently casts this type of body in another role: taking the abnormal body's cultural capacity for evoking fear into consideration, as well as its status as a threat to the survival of the normal body, it is hardly surprising that, '[...] as sufficient research has shown, more often than not villains tend to be physically abnormal: scarred, deformed, or mutilated', as Davis points out (Davis 1995, 41). Such physical marks of deviance emphasise the evil nature of a villain through a process in which the appearance of the non-normal body becomes a symbol of the inner values of the character in question, or rather in which the cultural connotations connected to the specific impairment of that character come to reflect the character as such, to the extent that all other complicating human traits seem to be erased. The equation of bodily form with inner values is, of course, an old tradition, as Mitchell and Snyder also mention: 'Historically, the physical surface has existed as a medium that exposes the more abstract and intangible landscapes of psychology, morality, and spirituality' (Mitchell and Snyder 1997/2000, 13). This tradition, then, makes it possible for the one-legged Captain Hook, Dr. No with the prosthetic hands (as well as many other James Bond antagonists), Dr. Frankenstein's fragmented and hideous monster and countless other characters with impairments to embody and become one with wickedness.

In a broader perspective, the role as antagonist is suggestive of how Western literature predominantly uses disability as an image of the absolute Other with which normality can be contrasted and validated, manifesting, on the one hand, the normal body as champion of everything that is beautiful, righteous and rational, and, on the other hand, the abnormal body as being repulsive, malicious and irrational. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; Or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), however, does, in its innermost narrative frame, begin a kind of deconstruction of this dichotomy, when she lets the monster tell its own story—a story that, eloquently told, proves to be very compelling and moving, revealing the humanity behind the hideous exterior of the monster. The label of monster becomes, because of his narration, somewhat unfitting, and hence the danger and power of letting abnormality speak—be it in the form of monsters, freaks or disabled people—becomes evident: it complicates and humanises their characters so that they no longer can be confined to their antagonistic positions of Otherness.

There are also a few examples from more recent American literature in which the abnormal body breaks out of its usual confines. In most of Carson McCullers' work, for instance, the freakish plays an important role of identification for the various other main characters, for whom the idea of normality seems imprisoning. Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976) is another example. This novel features Sissy Hankshaw, born with abnormally large thumbs, in the leading role and uses her bodily deviance as a means of liberation from rigid social conventions and trivial ways of life in its larger countercultural and anti-authoritarian agenda. While these two authors do complicate the identity of the disabled character and allow it an essential and undeniable humanity, they nevertheless use bodily difference more as symbols—in McCullers' case of a hidden inner self and in Robbins' of cultural transgression and transformation—than as character traits as such. That is, the allegorical is foregrounded at the expense of the realities of the characters with impairments.

Though the aforementioned literary works might be mitigating cases, the tendency of literature and other fiction in general is to represent impairments as defining and disabling body features that reflect and symbolise the antithesis of the productive, potent and autonomous normal person. Almost always, it would seem, the absolute

Other is fixed in stereotypical roles in which it can exude just that, its inherent difference. Davis argues a similar case, when he states that

[...] the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her. [...]. This normativity in narrative will by definition create the abnormal, the Other, the disabled [...]. (Davis 1995, 41-42)

This inherent normative agenda of narrative, then, ultimately re-produces the disabled figure in its worshipping of the normal individual, and has an important impact on the fixed ways in which we perceive and comprehend disability in society.

### ***Claiming Human Rights: Group Identity and Identity Politics***

While we have thus far seen how disability studies is interested in dismantling and deconstructing the concept of disability and its connotations, the aim is not to dismiss the category altogether and pretend that a person who has no arms, for example, functions in the same way as one who has all his limbs. Indeed, the focus of disability scholars on literature, as well as on other media, is related not only to how it has played a part of culture's stigmatisation of disability, but also to literature's capacity to tell a personal story, to present and unfold the unique experiences that emanate in the impaired body. Such a focus represents the essentialist dimension to disability studies—a dimension which insists on the difference of the disabled body and, in a larger scope, on the difference of each and every body.

This means that the often antagonistic views of social constructionism and essentialism become allied theories and strategies in order to promote an identity politics that both undermines disability as a natural category and retains the reality of inhabiting a body marked by physical difference. As Thomson concisely puts it:

On the one hand, then, it is important to use the constructionist argument to assert that disability is not bodily insufficiency, but instead arises from the interaction of physical differences with an environment. On the other hand, the particular, historical existence of



the disabled body demands both accommodation and recognition. In other words, the physical differences of using a wheelchair or being deaf, for example, should be claimed, but not cast as lack. (Thomson 1997, 23)

It follows that the essentialism of the disabled body is constituted by two forms of reality. Firstly, there is the very real, yet culturally and socially emanating, reality of isolation, alienation and non-accommodation which people with disabilities face on a day-to-day basis due to ideologically defined attitudes towards the appearance and functionality of their bodies. Secondly, there are the physical experiences stemming directly from impairments, such as not hearing or seeing, which shape the lives of impaired people regardless of their historical contexts. While these two forms might be difficult to separate completely from one another in practice, it is nevertheless of great importance to note that the first of these is to be fought as social injustice and ultimately dismantled, whereas the second is to be embraced as a character trait, a physical aspect which is part of, but does not in itself define, a person's identity.

From the shared encounters with the first form of essentialism among people with disabilities arises the rationale behind disability studies' claim for a group identity for all those immensely diverse and different impairments which we know under the name disability.<sup>9</sup> The insistence on such a group identity, in spite of the great differences among those who would claim it, is tied to a number of socio-political issues which are best pursued as a unity.<sup>10</sup> The two most acute of these issues address the civil rights for all to, in the words of Davis, '[...] be ill, to be infirm, to be impaired without suffering discrimination or oppression' (Davis 2002, 1), and the transformation of compensatory policies of disability—that is, policies formed by the view that the disabled body is a defect able body, and thus has to be economically compensated—to policies of accommodation, the logic of which suggests, as Thomson phrases it, '[...]

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<sup>9</sup> Although the formation of such a group identity is still in its early stages, Davis has already begun, in an essay entitled 'The End of Identity Politics and the Beginning of Dismodernism' (Davis 2002), to dismantle it, arguing that group identity, though at times a forceful political tool, is ultimately tied to the illusion of the whole, independent subject and, as such, is part of the regime of normality. Instead of pursuing the course of group identity, Davis suggests a promotion of a state of cultural ideology he terms dismodernism, in which all bodies are seen as disabled, dependent and incomplete. This state, he argues, will free the individual from the tyranny of normality and allow for an appreciation of individual difference.

<sup>10</sup> There are fractions of those ordinarily perceived as being disabled who do not wish to be associated with this group identity. The most prominent example is the fractions within the Deaf community who want to be recognised as a linguistic minority and not as having an impairment.

that disability is simply one of many differences among people and that society should recognize this by adjusting its environment accordingly' (Thomson 1997, 49). Taken together these issues present the overall agenda of removing the stigma of disability and making people with disabilities full and accepted citizens.

With the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), disability activists came a step closer to achieving these aims, as discrimination in regards to employment was prohibited, as was any other form of public discrimination against those deemed disabled, while the provision of accessibility and reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities became law. This act, however, is not without its problems and the success of some of its laws has been questioned, especially by Davis (see Davis 2002, 1-7). Nonetheless, there is a consensus among disability studies scholars that ADA represents a landmark towards a less discriminating view on the disabled body.

Notwithstanding its being regarded as a landmark achievement, there are issues of discrimination with which this act does not engage. One of these relates to women's abortion rights and the abortion of fetuses that are likely to become disabled children. Whereas disability scholars and activists have sought to validate the quality of living of people with disability, medical science and the general population, Marsha Saxton argues in 'Disability Rights and Selective Abortion' (1998/2006), still seem to be of the belief that

[...] the quality of life for disabled people is necessarily inferior, that raising a child with a disability is a wholly undesirable experience, that selective abortion will save mothers from the burdens of raising disabled children, and that we as a society have the means and the right to decide who is better off not being born. (Saxton 1998/2006, 106)

This general (mis-)understanding of a life with disabilities and the experiences of raising a child with disabilities exercises its influence during prenatal care of pregnant women when the decision is made of whether or not to have an amniocentesis. There arises a societal emphasis on the former due to the fact that disability is believed only to bring with it pain and burdens, and so the abortion of fetuses with genetic markers of disorders and disabilities is by and large seen as the humane thing to do. But the point of view that forms the basis of such an opinion is, as Saxton also notes, inextricably bound up with the eugenic argument that the disabilities are defects and that defects in

humans are to be avoided for the greater good of our race. This ‘greater good’ contrasts with the *joie de vivre* expressed by most people who actually live with disabilities or have children with disabilities, and represents a crucial form of discrimination against disability. For if the disabled body is regarded as defective, burdensome and tragic at the outset of life, then it inevitably faces a life in which it has an inferior position vis-à-vis the able body, in which it becomes an object of pity and repulsion, in which it is understood, or rather not understood, as Other and thus isolated, just as we have seen throughout this chapter.<sup>11</sup> In this way, birth politics becomes as important to disability studies as cultural ideology and representation; they are all inextricably tied to one another and represent a general attitude towards and understanding of disability that must be undone if people with disabilities are to be liberated from isolation.

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note here that disability studies and disability activists do not question women’s right to have abortions, but rather decry the basis upon which many decisions to abort a disabled fetus are made.

## Hard-boiled Crime Fiction Meets Tourettic Private Eye in *Motherless Brooklyn*

The thesis is that our identity is shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.

—Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’

Born in 1964 in Brooklyn, New York, Jonathan Lethem published his debut novel *Gun, with Occasional Music* (1994) thirty years later to praising words from excited reviewers. Mixing science fiction elements with the crime fiction genre, Lethem’s first novel helped him gain the reputation of a highly competent and original ‘genre bender’, whose work is always likely to take you places you have never quite been or imagined. His following three novels steered away from crime fiction, exploring such diverse literary grounds as that of the road narrative, science fiction and the western, but with the release of *Motherless Brooklyn* in 1999 he once again returned to a *noir*-inspired universe and storyline. By far his most acclaimed publication, winning him for example the 1999 National Book Critics Circle Award and the Macmillan Gold Dagger Award in 2000 for Best Crime Novel, *Motherless Brooklyn* is the story of four orphans (Tony, Danny, Gilbert and Lionel), whose lives change profoundly when they are introduced to small-time crook Frank Minna and become part of his business. The novel gets underway on the day that Frank is murdered and the ticcing, twitching, compulsive Tourette’s-suffering Lionel takes on the responsibility of solving the untimely demise of his father-figure. An unlikely detective as he is, bringing a whole new approach to a role steeped in tradition, Lionel effectively engages in a murder puzzle as well as a quest for identity and origins (the *motherless* in the title seems not only to refer to orphanage, but also to lack of origins) on his own terms. With the lead detective and narrator-protagonist being a figure of disorder, the novel immediately situates itself as belonging to Lethem’s genre bending work.

Crime fiction is, of course, a very broad category of literature that is made up of a wide variety of sub-genres. The frequent intertextual references to Raymond

Chandler's Philip Marlowe, the harsh tone and the macho milieu are just some evident clues, however, that from the beginning tells the reader he has entered some sort of distorted version of what is known as *the hard-boiled crime fiction genre*. As its name suggests this type of fiction does not feature the gentlemen-like detective found in influential and famous authors such as Agatha Christie and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but instead introduces an always white, male main character with a penchant for both tough talk and violence. With its white macho attitude, it is hardly surprising that the genre has been highly criticised by both feminism and racial studies; nor is it entirely a shock that it has been appropriated by those figures which it has traditionally been thought to oppress, as a form of social critique or literary subversion. Thus, the hard-boiled genre has for many years now been populated not only by the Philip Marlowe-type private eye but also by black, female, lesbian and gay protagonists in charge of the puzzling question of *whodunit?*

In older types of crime fiction, there is also a tendency to allow a member of an oppressed group—mostly women—to fill in the role of detective. In a survey entitled *Crime Fiction 1800-2000* (2004), Stephen Knight notices that through, for example, '[...] the perceptive village spinster Miss Marple [...]' Agatha Christie shows how low ranking members of society may indeed be sources of great good (Knight 2004, 90). Lethem's agenda seems to be a mix of subversion, social critique and an acknowledgement of how a disabled person has the capacity for good. While Tourette's syndrome may only medically be termed as a *potentially disabling disorder*—or so at least James F. Leckman and Donald J. Cohen tells us in the preface to *Tourette's Syndrome—Tics, Obsessions, Compulsions: Developmental Psychopathology and Clinical Care* (1999)—Lionel's story certainly exhibits how it is acutely disabling in relation to other people and, as such, qualifies as a narration from a disability point of view.

The following pages, then, will present discussions of various aspects of Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* with point of departure in both genre theory regarding hard-boiled crime fiction, relying especially on Knight's aforementioned book and Lee Horsley's *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (2005), and many of the disability studies issues with which we have just dealt. Firstly, we shall look at how, through a change of context, Lionel is transformed from being something of a court jester at the beg and call

of his surrogate father Frank to becoming a potent detective and narrator that succeeds not only in telling his story but also in solving Frank's murder. This change in roles raises issues of how the characteristics of the Tourettic Lionel enables and disables him vis-à-vis the traditional private eye and those ideologies for which he stands, which are to be focused upon secondly. Then, we shall consider bodily Otherness and recuperation of such Otherness by looking at Lionel's at times torn relationship with his Tourettic self, and how he tries to come to terms with this. Subsequently, the focus will be on how the deviant body of Lionel enters into the matrix of desire with the opposite sex and into homosocial power structures within the Minna Men organisation, in the hierarchy of which he is at the very bottom. Finally, we shall relate many of the issues we have already discussed to some of the defining tenets of postmodern storytelling.

***Context Is Everything: From Absurd  
Court Jester to Potent Detective-Narrator***

In the midst of overwhelming danger, barely on his feet after being beaten, doped and locked up, Philip Marlowe—without comparison the single most influential literary character in shaping the general understanding of what constitutes a hard-boiled private eye—nevertheless confronts his adversary Dr. Sonderborg with ironic spite and macho confidence in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940): “Don't make me get tough,” I whined. “Don't make me lose my beautiful manners and my flawless English” (Chandler quoted in Horsley 2005, 84). A typical and defining character trait as this is, the witty and aggressive response to a potentially fatal situation becomes a vital weapon for Raymond Chandler's legendary protagonist—as well as for many of the subsequent private eye characters whose creation he inspired—in asserting masculine mastery faced with an otherwise disorderly and threatening world. Language, indeed, assumes an important role in this sort of fiction as a means of control. As Horsley astutely remarks, ‘[v]oice is crucial to hard-boiled fiction, and the verbal armoury of the private eye—slang and tough talk, the laconic wit of the wisecrack, the hard-boiled simile—affords him an aura of mastery, however illusory his control might be’ (Horsley 2005, 73).

The seemingly displaced confidence manifested by Marlowe becomes a way of retaining and projecting a self-image of a fearless, unshakeable ‘knight,’ to use

Horsley's romanticised label. Lethem's knight, on the other hand, is not capable of asserting coolness and control when threatened. In a somewhat similar situation to that of Marlowe's, Lionel Essrog comes face-to-face with the giant Polish killer, who at the beginning of the novel did away his mentor and father-figure Frank Minna; held at gunpoint, Lionel's Tourette's syndrome starts acting up:

My brain whispered, *He's just a big mouse, Daddy, a vigorous louse, big as a house, a couch, a man, a plan, a canal, apocalypse.*

"Apocamouse," I mumbled, language spilling out of me unrestrained. "Unplan-a-canal. Unpluggaphone." (Lethem 1999/2000, 204; original italics)

Whereas the archetypal private eyes cover up or compensate for uncontrollable circumstances with tough talk, the language that spills out of Lionel represents a much more direct interpretation of his emotional state, as it seems to tap directly into his consciousness in a way which ordinary language cannot. His words are immediate and uncontrolled associations of the thoughts that come to mind as he finds himself at the mercy of a ruthless killer: 'He's just a big mouse,' his brain tells him, manifesting a childish fear-management argument; but this promptly gives way to the less reassuring—and, in the first case, rhyming—facts of his Polish adversary being 'big as a house' and the impending, personal 'apocalypse' which Lionel may be facing. In his verbal tics, these emotional states melt together into 'apocamouse,' implying a more complex feeling than the word fear connotes, and finally, through free association and wordplay, end in 'unpluggaphone,' possibly a simile for death.

Lionel's expressions may at first seem absurd, as mere nonsense, but despite their playful nature, or perhaps more precisely because of it, they do appear hinged to a deeper epistemological level, verbalising the inner processes that lurk below consciousness. In this manner, the word *con-worried* is born when Lionel feels something in-between worried and confused (ibid., 144), and *DickTracyphone* at one point becomes his greeting message on the phone after he has heard the name in a conversation and as he begins to take on the role of detective (ibid., 162-163). More than just merely reflecting an inner process, then, such colourful expressions seem to develop from an interdependent relationship among an ontological situation, an epistemological process and an uncontrolled linguistic solo performance, which

playfully juggles with the cultural connotations as well as with the sounds of words and puts them together in unique ways. The element of uncontrollability marks this relationship profoundly, displaying how Lionel is not, as Marlowe, the master of language and emotions, but that emotions and language are rather the masters of him in many situations.

Not all of the verbal tics, however, are as immediately informative and interpretable as the ones we have just discussed. For the most part they are vulgar exclamations (such as the recurring *Eatme!*) or playful word-associations generated from something which has just been uttered. But even in those cases they, along with his obsessive touching, have a clear agenda, as Lionel explains:

Everywhere they're smoothing down imperfections, putting hairs in place, putting ducks in a row, replacing divots. [...]. Only—here's the rub—when they find too much perfection, when the surface is already buffed smooth, the ducks already orderly, the old ladies complacent, then my little army rebels, breaks into the stores. Reality needs a prick here and there, the carpet needs a flaw. My words begin plucking at threads nervously, seeking purchase, a weak point, a vulnerable ear. (ibid., 1-2)

In other words, his syndrome is engaged in a constant (re-)construction and deconstruction of reality and perfection, which ultimately demonstrates an acute awareness of, as well as a rebellion against, those behavioural norms he continually and involuntarily disrupts. This also sets him apart from the prototypical private eye who is always engaged in restoring order and dissolving chaos, insofar as the tics maintain a continuing interplay between both these extremes.

Infused with a clear agenda, Lionel's verbal tics challenge the label of absurd, of being without meaning, which is, as we have already discussed, how disabilities and disorders are generally understood: as mistakes of nature that contrast with the naturalness and, consequently, purposefulness of the normal body. Throughout the novel, Lionel must struggle against such a view, both in his flashbacks from his childhood and his narration of the Frank Minna murder mystery, whenever his Tourettic self takes control and transgresses behavioural and linguistic norms, eliciting responses as, for example, Crazyman (Twenty-Four-Hour Market owner Zeod's name for him), Free Human Freakshow (Frank's somewhat affectionate nickname for him) and freak of



nature (the Italian gangster bosses Matricardi and Rockaforte's derogatory label for him). All of these names, of course, signal how our narrator is situated, even by his closest acquaintances, in opposition to all that is sane, rational and normal, and how he is alienated not only from society but also from the rest of the Minna Men group, in which he is regarded, as Krist notes in his review, as '[...] the fool, the court jester, whose antics the others tolerate with the indulgence that forced proximity dictates' (Krist 1999, Salon.com Book Review).

In fact, Frank Minna deliberately and intelligently employs Lionel's 'antics' in his small-time gangster business: 'And Minna loved my effect on his clients and associates, the way I'd unnerve them, disrupt some schmooze with an utterance, a head jerk, a husky "*Eatmebailey!*" I was his special effect, a running joke embodied' (Lethem 1999/2000, 57; original italics). Here, the non-normal body becomes an effect more than anything else, a subhuman entity which is employed so as to evoke certain feelings in the beholders, in the same way as the oddities of the Freak Show. The difference is, of course, that Frank needs his Free Human Freakshow to evoke fear, not to validate his clients' normality—something which is accomplished through the element of surprise and the fact that Lionel is not placed in a 'controlled' environment, such as the pit of the Freak Show.<sup>12</sup> His Otherness remains untamed and thus threatening.

While this certainly makes Lionel into the freak, and consequently Frank into the show manager, the objectification our narrator must accept in his association with the Minna Men nonetheless affords him a rare opportunity to be at ease with his Tourette's syndrome. Having just described how he became a joke embodied, he tells us that '[i]n this way Minna licensed my speech, and speech, it turned out liberated me from the overflowing disaster of my Tourettic self [...]' (ibid., 57). The part of himself which he always has to conceal desperately (never succeeding, of course) and which in all other situations seems to relegate him to a madman suddenly becomes useful, and this not only legitimises his tics, which is liberating in itself, but also endows him with purpose. For a short while, in the context of Frank's business, his absurdity is erased.

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<sup>12</sup> Lionel's Tourettic self seems to meta-reflect on this position and manifest an aversion against it in the frequent vocalisations of *Eatmebailey* or *Eatmebarnamumbailey*, which refers, as Lionel lets on (Lethem 1999/2000, 21-22), to the *Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus*, probably the most influential and best known exponent of the Freak Show.

However, even when his outbursts are tolerated, he never transcends the boundaries of Otherness; not until he begins narration, that is.

For the predefined inferior position Lionel faces in his relations with the surrounding world—a position corresponding to that we discussed throughout the disability studies survey—is subverted in *Motherless Brooklyn*, both through Lionel's change of roles from absurd court jester to potent private eye and through his position of protagonist-narrator. Indeed, it is context that helps define how we see him, which he also makes clear at the very onset of the novel: 'Context is everything. Dress me up and see. I'm a carnival barker, an auctioneer, a downtown performance artist, a speaker in tongues, a senator drunk on filibuster' (ibid., 1). In the context of Frank's business, of his fellowship with the other Minna Men, of the women he meets, he is the freak, the crazyman, but, as he takes on the role of narrator-protagonist, he becomes something different altogether. First of all he counters the typical position of the deviant body as an object to be looked at through the normative gaze or stare: Lionel is neither another Tiny Tim-like figure at the margins of a narrative, there only as an artistic effect or literary device, nor is he the horrifying Freak Show-mirror that confirms the normality of onlookers. Instead, he becomes the acting subject through whose eyes we scrutinise a tough urban macho world, the dual voice of controlled description and uncontrolled ticcings that unravels for us the mystery of a murder and the body through which we experience emotions from hope to despair. 'For once', as Lionel poignantly puts it, 'I was playing lead detective instead of comic—or Tourettic—relief' (ibid., 143).

True, his gaze is often focused inwards, and especially on his Tourettic compulsions, but not in a way that makes him pitiful, repulsive and fundamentally alien or pathological. The prominent position of Tourette's syndrome in the novel rather represents how this disorder profoundly affects his everyday life,<sup>13</sup> how it is an integral part of his self, certainly because of the essentialist aspects to it, but perhaps even more because of his surroundings' reactions to it. A point which he stresses himself when he, for the first time, meets the homicide detective who is in charge of the murder investigation:

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<sup>13</sup> To name a few examples of this: the decoration of his apartment needs to be sparse in case he suddenly has the compulsion to touch everything; he no longer has a cat, since his obsessive behaviour towards it makes it crazy.

My life story to this point:

The teacher looked at me like I was crazy.

The social-services worker looked at me like I was crazy.

The boy looked at me like I was crazy and then hit me.

The girl looked at me like I was crazy.

The woman looked at me like I was crazy.

The black homicide detective looked at me like I was crazy. (ibid., 107)

It is the ideology of normality, indoctrinated in and enforced by almost all the people he comes across, that causes the greatest distress, and the freedom to tic freely, both within the community of the Minna Men, to some degree, or within his narration as such, that are the sources of the greatest alleviation from his condition. In this way, his narration portrays an ultimately hostile world towards his non-normality, while de-alienating him in relation to the reader by giving us insight into his humanity and making us understand what Tourette's syndrome is. Krist also acknowledges a fundamental humanity in the Lionel character, when he notes that '[...] Lethem never lets the metaphorical and linguistic possibilities of his narrator's illness overshadow his immensely appealing humanity [...]' (Krist 1999, Salon.com Book Review).

The role as private eye further empowers him, of course, and estranges him in relation to the typically pitiful crippled figure of Otherness, since it demands potent agency and action. Although he does not assert the verbal control and mastery which Marlowe so readily employs, Lionel does stand out as a capable yet unusual—but *not* disabled—private eye, who in the end succeeds in solving the case. In the final sentence of the novel, reiterating a favourite catch-phrase of Frank Minna's, Lionel encourages the reader to '[t]ell your story walking': this points to the importance and potential power of being able to tell one's story, while also admitting that his story belongs to a tradition of storytelling, in a narrow scope Frank's and in a larger scope the hard-boiled detective genre.

***Tourettic Teachings: Liberal Individualism,  
Isolation and the Lone American Hero***

Apart from the weaponry of tough talk and ironic spite, the generic type of noir mystery sleuth is also marked by occasional subtlety (when called for, that is) and the ability to blend into surroundings in the inevitable stakeouts and pursuits he must engage in to solve his case. Meet Lionel in the same type of situation, in front of the Yorkville Zendo where Frank Minna had a fatal meeting before being brutally murdered:

See me now, at one in the morning, stepping out of another cab in front of the Zendo, checking the street for cars that might have followed, for giveaway cigarette-tip glows through the windows of the cars parked on the deadened street, moving with my hands in my jacket pockets clutching might-be-guns-for-all-they-know, collar up against the cold like Minna, unshaven like Minna now, too, shoes clacking on sidewalk: think of a coloring-book image of the Green Hornet, say. That's who I was supposed to be, that black outline of a man in a coat, ready suspicious eyes above his collar, shoulders hunched, moving toward conflict.

Here's who I was instead: that same coloring-book outline of a man, but crayoned by the hand of a mad or carefree or retarded child, wild slashes of idiot color, a blizzard of marks violating the boundaries that made *man* distinct from *street*, from *world*. (Lethem 1999/2000, 226; original italics)

Just as he failed to conform to the verbal tradition of the private eye, he likewise becomes a disruption in the visual field with his erratic movements, blurred form and distorted appearance. Contrasting himself with the sly Minna and the Green Hornet, effective vigilante hero, Lionel admits how he in many ways is a misfit in relation to the role which he has taken on.

But this position as a misfit not only extends to detective work. At an earlier point in his narration, recalling childhood memories from the library where he tried to escape and understand his developing Tourette's syndrome, he discovers that there are no cultural figures to whom he can relate, no obvious idols in whom he can recognise himself and thus no palpable societal positions into which he can assimilate:

[...] I sought signs of my odd dawning self in Theodore Dreiser, Kenneth Robert, J. B. Priestley, and back issues of *Popular Mechanics* and failed, couldn't find the language of myself, as I failed to in watching television, those endless reruns of *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* and *I Love Lucy* and *Gilligan* and *Brady Bunch* by which we nerdish unathletic Boys pounded our way through countless afternoons [...] but I didn't find myself there [...]. (ibid., 37)

The failure to trace any evidence of ticcing, Tourettic characters in such diverse works as Theodore Dreiser's naturalistic novels and the popular, mainstream TV show *Gilligan* reflects the omission and silencing of disabled characters which we discussed in the disability studies survey, and it sends a message to Lionel that he is acutely abnormal and extra-cultural.

It is not entirely true, however, that there exist no cultural characters within the novel that in some way resemble the behaviour which our narrator increasingly develops as he moves into adolescence. Turning to Saturday morning TV entertainment instead, comic cartoon figures such as Daffy Duck, he admits, come closer to representing that which he feels lurks inside of him. In this sense, the disorder from which he suffers is relegated in cultural representations to an unrealistic sphere of raving lunatics and madness, far from what is considered reality. On the very first page of his story, another possible role of the disorderly body is presented, when Lionel parenthetically remarks, '(If I were a Dick Tracy villain, I'd have to be Mumbles)' (ibid., 1). Again this seems to confirm what was discussed earlier on regarding cultural representations of disabled characters, inasmuch as we here have examples of the deviant body as either being evil or being a comic relief. As if accommodating these traditional representations of deviant bodies, Minna recruits and employs Lionel in a position in which he becomes something of a crossbreed between comic—Tourettic—relief and a small-time thug, as we have already seen. When Minna dies, however, the fixed social order and hierarchy of the Minna Men agency is suddenly and temporarily suspended as the role of lead detective becomes available.

Despite the obvious disadvantages that have been discussed, there are in fact certain aspects to this role which are in keeping with the nature of Lionel. The first of these has to do with the forced isolation he endures, both within the group of his closest not-quite-friends but rather associates and in society as such. For, in the hard-boiled

crime fiction genre and the often violent crusades against injustice it depicts, isolation is indeed one of the trademarks of its Philip Marlowes, Sam Spades and Mike Hammers. Accordingly, Knight notes that

[...] the private eye operates alone, judges others by himself, shares no one's values and mores. Nor even facts: he rarely detects very much, using his movements, observations, consciousness (and his frequent unconsciousness) as his primary method of unravelling a mystery. He is I rather than eye, and his story is in the first person [...]. (Knight 2004, 112)

In this type of literature, then, there is a very strong emphasis on and belief in the heroic capabilities and sense of justice of the isolated individual in his encounters with corrupt powers and often with a fundamentally corrupt society.<sup>14</sup> Isolated as Lionel is, and certainly sharing no one's mores, he fits into this category of the lone male American hero, who utilises movements and observations (in his case often involuntarily) as the primary tools to engage with the conspiracies, opportunists and killers surrounding him. As such, he conforms to Knight's depiction above and also to Horsley's remark that hard-boiled private eyes '[...] are marginalized, outsiders forced into awareness of the failings of established power structures [...]' (Horsley 2005, 6).

Minna, attuned to a less than faithful and loyal milieu, recognises Lionel's marginalised position, and because of it he implicitly leaves the solving of his own murder to his pet Freakshow when he gives away the only clue to the culprit behind the crime in form of an inside joke between him and Lionel. Not corrupted by the gangster world of which he is not allowed to be fully part, Lionel, the lowest ranking member of the Minna Men hierarchy, ironically becomes the only one whom Minna can trust, which our narrator also points out as he finally discovers that Frank's older brother Gerard is responsible for the murder:

He [Frank] didn't know who among his Men to trust, even down to Gilbert Coney. [...].

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<sup>14</sup> As such, the private eye belongs to a long tradition of lone American heroes, which Knight also points out: 'The tough detective was seen as a modern but also traditional American hero, like the earlier pathfinder or cowboy, an idea offered by Leslie Fiedler [in *Love and Death in the American Novel* 1960] and influentially elaborated by George Grella [in 'Murder and the Mean Streets' 1974]' (Knight 2004, 111).

And he felt, rightly, that no conspiracy around him could possibly include his pet Freakshow. The other Boys would never let me play. I could be flattered at the implied trust, or insulted by the dis. It didn't really matter now. (Lethem 1999/2000, 201)

While this act of Frank's may signal the integrity and trustworthiness of Lionel (something which he indeed exhibits throughout the novel), it also clearly manifests the deviant body as positioned at the margins of society, not accepted but rather isolated as a figure of Otherness. The generic type of private eye may be an outsider by his own volition, which exemplifies how he disassociates himself from the inherently corrupt, but he nonetheless shares the extra-societal point-of-view of Lethem's hero, and thus the genre of the first person private eye becomes an obvious narrative form for narrating the story of an unlikely protagonist.

Ironically, though the hero takes an extra-societal stance within the covers of his narration, the values and behaviours he manifests are closely tied to an ideology which is very much imbedded in American society and culture. Both Knight and Horsley argue that the private eye character is built on notions of American individualism, which in turn is shaped by liberalism. Horsley, for example, states that

[t]he private eye's characteristic competence is closely associated with the qualities of American individualism: as Dennis Porter suggests, the label 'private eye' in itself connotes solitariness, 'a non-organization man's eye, like the frontier scout's or the cowboy's; an eye that trusts no other' [...]. (Horsley 2005, and Horsley quoting Porter, 74)<sup>15</sup>

The ideology of liberal individualism, which was also briefly mentioned in my survey, is not only an insistence on acting and behaving in one's own way; it is also closely bound up with a particular understanding of the human body. This becomes clear in Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies*, in which she outlines the four interrelated principles upon which liberal individualism relies: self-government, self-determination, autonomy and progress. These principles paint a picture of the body as an always yielding instrument of the mind—one's will embodied, as it were—and emphasises the

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<sup>15</sup> The Porter quote is from *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2003, 95), edited by Martin Priestman.

individual as the master of his own destiny, without admitting the possible inference of external factors (Thomson 1997, 41-44). Such a view on the body takes for granted the wholeness of self which is, as we have seen, created in the mirror phase and which represses a more primary fragmented experience of self.

It is not difficult to see how the traditional private eye reproduces the image of an autonomous, self-determining and whole individual, insofar as so much of his narration centres on his mastery of himself. As Knight explains,

[i]nnate rectitude, determination and bravery are coupled with isolation [in hard-boiled crime fiction], and this mechanism is inscribed in the plots in an extraordinarily compulsive feature. [...]. [The protagonist's] time, his courage, above all his values, are controlled by himself. (Knight 2004, 113)

Armed with such a determining control over himself, the protagonist faces and is contrasted with a situation, a society which is temporarily, in some cases, and more persistently, in others, marked by chaos and disorder and a terrain that, in Horsley's description, is '[...] to be grasped only in a fragmentary way' (Horsley 2005, 71). As has been noted above, the language of the detective plays an important role in the assertion of this self-control, and it '[...] enables him', Horsley argues, 'to project a coherent self in the face of the chaos that threatens to engulf him, and in defiance of his own manifest weaknesses' (ibid., 73). As such, this type of literature can be seen as celebratory and confirming of American liberal individualism.

Conversely, the seemingly compensatory role of this individualism—that is, how it compensates for the 'manifest weaknesses' of our hero and the 'chaos that threatens to engulf him'—can also be seen as suggesting the illusory nature of the whole and autonomous self. A fragmented and fragile self seems to lurk threateningly behind the private eye's male mastery—a truth which is finally repressed when he solves his case and thus manifests the undeniable superiority of the righteous individual. Such a juxtaposition of self-mastery as an inherent quality of man and self-mastery as an illusion employed to conceal fragility conforms to Thomson's elucidation of how the self which liberal individualism promotes as a human norm is shaped in opposition to all that is associated with the disabled body (Thomson 1997, 41-44).



As a disabled figure, Lionel and his deviant body indeed represent all those qualities which the tough detective and his narration disavow and repress. For whereas Lionel is an isolated character in the same manner as the seminal sleuths of the genre, his body violates all those principles of American liberal individualism which is typically embodied by the noir mystery hero. His incoherent verbal displays, his compulsive behaviour, his obsessive touching and reordering of things and, more generally, the lack of total control over himself gives an impression of instability, fragility, disorder and randomness, all words that imply the absolute opposites of the normal body, and all behaviours that disrupt other characters' sense of reality. As an obvious consequence, Lionel's body becomes something that *must* be ignored, which he also remarks himself:

Tourette's teaches you what people will ignore and forget, teaches you to see the reality-knitting mechanism people employ to tuck away the intolerable, the incongruous, the disruptive—it teaches you this because you're the one lobbing the intolerable, incongruous, and disruptive their way. (Lethem 1999/2000, 43)

Lionel's Tourettic body as well as his Tourettic narration, then, challenges and subverts the notion of liberal individualism, highlights repressed truths about the human body which have been tucked away so as to maintain a specific view on both the body and the world.

Notwithstanding this subversive stance, there is still a strong emphasis on the individual as a potent figure, capable of effective agency, even when faced with difficult situations. But this emphasis is moderated by granting uncontrollable external as well as internal factors the power to greatly influence all aspects of life. There is no absolute stable, autonomous body, but a body in a dynamic relationship with its context. This also means that, whereas typical crime fiction teaches us that order is the primary state of things, disrupted only by forces and acts of evil, *Motherless Brooklyn* shows us that disorder and chaos are indeed a more natural condition, both within the individual and society as such,<sup>16</sup> and that order is a concept that has to be imposed and enforced by force.

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<sup>16</sup> That New York City, the setting of the novel, is marked by such disorder is made clear throughout the story, and is explicitly emphasised as such when Lionel observes that '(New York is a Tourettic city, and

The second aspect of Lionel's nature that lets him assimilate into the detective role is indeed his Tourettic behaviour, which paradoxically also seems to render him as an unlikely detective. At the beginning of his story, he tells us, as we have already seen, that his '[...] words begin plucking at threads nervously, seeking purchase, a weak point, a vulnerable ear' (ibid, 2). His 'plucking at threads' is suggestive of how Lionel obsessively engages with the reality-knitting processes of his surroundings in a perpetual 'game' of re-ordering and disordering such processes. Krist states that, '[i]n a sense, this is detective work as medical condition, stemming from a pathological need to poke at experience, to process its patterns [...]' (Krist 1999, Salon.com Book Review). The pathology that, in the eyes of others, disables him as an effective private eye, as well as a normal human being, actually enables him to solve some of the puzzles of the Frank Minna murder case.

Frank Minna's clue to who it is that is responsible for his killing, for instance, left in form of a reference to a joke<sup>17</sup> Lionel has once told him (Lethem 1999/2000, 29), becomes the crucial element as regards Lionel's investigation, since it makes him capable of recognising Gerard, Frank's brother, as the man responsible (the actual killer being the Polish hired gun). This clue is intended for our narrator only, for reasons we have already discussed, and it is his incessant poking at the linguistic aspects of this joke that transforms it into an informative discourse, where it for Gilbert remains a part of Frank and Lionel's shared craziness. As Lionel explains, having just figured out the point of the joke, '[Frank] could be certain I'd puzzle over the Irving clue while Gilbert would write it off as our mutual inanity' (ibid., 201). In this sense, the Tourettic disorder—understood as disability, lack of ability from a normative perspective—suddenly appears as an ability and a tool, which not only impedes the fulfilling of his desire to get to the bottom of his mentor and father figure's demise, but also fuels this desire and helps him fulfil it.

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this great communal scratching and counting and tearing is a definite symptom)' (Lethem 1999/2000, 113).

<sup>17</sup> The joke, which appears in full length on page 88, tells the story about the High Lama in Tibet who, before he attained this high spiritual position, was known as Irving in USA and how his mother comes to visit him to tell him that they worry about him back home. It implies the connections between Gerard, his position as Zen master at the Yorkville Zendo and his involvement in the killing.

### ***Experiment of Self: Recuperation and Familiarisation of the Uncanny***

In the highly inventive book *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (1993), Peter Brooks remarks on our relationship with our bodies that '[w]e are, in various conceptions or metaphors, in our body, or having a body, or at one with our body, or alienated from it. The body is both ourselves and other, and as such the object of emotions from love to disgust' (Brooks 1993, 1). This statement, of course, reiterates the tenet of disability studies that the body of the Other is a cultural spectacle of disgust and pity, but it also points to the unsettling notion of how each and every body seems, at times, to be more an alien entity than an embodiment of self. Such a dualistic point of view, which indeed has been very influential in Western thought, is suggestive of the insecurity which even those considered normal may feel in regards to their body and is also in line with those explanations we have already discussed concerning why such cultural phenomena as the Freak Show was very popular in its day: here, people could project their anxieties about their bodies onto the absolute Other and thus assume normality, both in body and mind. What this reveals, then, is that the body is something which we have a great need to come to terms with, to understand and to master.

This is also reflected in much literature. Taking his cue from Wallace Stevens' *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, Brooks argues that the prominent position of the body in literature is bound up with a desire to recuperate it from Otherness:

If the "place that is not our own" and "not ourselves" is the world, it can often seem that the body, our body, belongs to the world and not to our ideally constructed selves. If the motive of poetry is an attempted recuperation of an otherness, often that otherness is our own body. (Brooks 1993, 2)

Hard-boiled crime fiction can indeed also be seen as being engaged in a recuperation of the body from Otherness, especially in form of the compensatory macho identity which the protagonist must continually project in order to keep the dangers of a fragile body and fragmented self under wraps. Liberal individualism and the broader term normality are, in a sense, coping strategies for the private eye in his quest to ensure order, not only

in an alien world but also within an alien body—an ironic idea since such ideologies seem to serve more to estrange us from the reality of our bodies in some ways.

Whereas the recuperation of an alien body is always a repressed and hidden agenda of traditional crime fiction, it figures in a much more evident and explicit form in *Motherless Brooklyn*. Here, the narrator's struggle to reconsolidate self and body is foregrounded throughout the many chapters as the discordance between the two is explicitly contemplated and problematised. This struggle—marked by Lionel's description of how he has '[...] no control in [his] personal experiment of self' (Lethem 1999/2000, 131)—belongs to the greater theme of the book, which is the necessity of Lionel to reinvent, or perhaps rather to finally accept if not fully understand, himself in the vacuum of purpose and meaning that arises following his father figure's death. An epistemological endeavour as this is, it is nevertheless troubled by the ontological realities of a body that flaunts disruption and impotence and violates normality and autonomy. "I'm always serious. That's the tragedy of my life", Lionel says, held at gunpoint once again, this time by Tony, pointing to how his body does not reflect what he wants it to convey (ibid., 181).

The non-conformity of Lionel's body vis-à-vis his mind is not, however, a classic example of mind and body dualism, since the disorder from which he suffers inhabits the brain or the mind of a person, and, as such, in a dualistic line of thought, not the body per se. Tourette's is, as Lionel explains it (ibid., 2), an *urge* developing in the mind, demanding gratification in form of verbal or physical reaction. These urges and demands are not controlled by the super ego of Lionel,<sup>18</sup> but are more deep-rooted in his mind, which make them both definitely self but also defiantly Other. In an article entitled 'The Culture of Disease or the Dis-ease of Culture in *Motherless Brooklyn* and *Eve's Apple*' (2003), Kravitz notes something similar, remarking that '[t]he narrative emphasizes the self-and-other-game that Lionel plays with his disease. Sometimes they are one, while at other times Tourette's Syndrome is a separate entity that acts as Lionel's adversary' (Kravitz 2003, 175).

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<sup>18</sup> At the age of twelve, when his Tourette's begins to manifest itself more strongly, Lionel indeed feels so estranged from himself that he begins to fear the nature lurking inside because of this lack of control: 'I grew terrified of myself then, and burrowed deeper into the library, but was forced out for classes or meals or bedtime' (Lethem 1999/2000, 45).

Not being a game as much as it is an attempted recuperation of self and body, the interplay between Tourette's as an alien force and Tourette's as an integral part of Lionel's self is reflected on many levels of the narrative. On a typographical level, for example, the Tourettic exclamations are in many cases set in italics, separating them from intended speech and thoughts, which indicates them as Other; at the same time they are not silenced and omitted from Lionel's narrative, which is an admittance that they are an important part of him. Perhaps the most explicit example of Lionel contemplating his torn self occurs in the atypical, interlude-like chapter quoted below:

**(TOURETTE DREAMS)**

(in Tourette dreams you shed your tics)

(or your tics shed you)

(and you go with them, astonished to leave yourself behind). (Lethem 1999/2000, 130)

The objective of the dream seems to be the achievement of a sense of unity, but the dream does not conclude that being rid of one's tics is the answer (this would indeed be the solution offered by a normative society<sup>19</sup>); instead it suggests an acceptance of the tics, 'you go with them', and the rejection of a self that demands conformity with ideals of normality, as the words 'leave yourself behind' may imply. Even at an early stage in his life, Lionel appears to grasp that the eradication of his tics is an eradication of a part of himself, when he tells us that 'I might outsmart my symptoms, disguise or incorporate them, frame them as eccentricity or vaudeville, but I wouldn't narcotize them, not if it meant dimming the world (or my brain—the same thing) to twilight' (ibid., 83). What he is able to give us due to this rejection of normalisation is an insight into his undimmed world or brain—the same thing—in the form of his narration; and the narrative indeed becomes somewhat therapeutic to him, inasmuch as it is a more clarified Lionel we meet at the end of the novel,<sup>20</sup> accepting that he is still the *Dapper* and *Stooges* of the Minna Men (ibid., 306).

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<sup>19</sup> Psychoanalysis, medication, plastic surgery as well as other types of surgery are undeniable evidence of how our culture's reaction to abnormality and disability is to try to cure it, eradicate it or normalise it.

<sup>20</sup> This clarity may also have to do with a beginning realisation of a Jewish heritage, indicating that he indeed belongs somewhere—something which may be indicated by his Jewish last name Essrog and his hankering for kosher food in the last chapter of the novel. For further explanation of this, see Bent Sørensen's 'Narratives of Disorder – Disorder of Narrative' (2006).

The novel's occupation with the torn relationship among mind, Tourettic mind and body operates so as to familiarise the reader with, or rather reveal the human familiarity to him, of the apparently unfamiliar, namely the Tourettic protagonist. At the beginning of the novel, Lionel stands out as an acutely uncanny character, flaunting fragmentation, chaos and madness yet narrating this through a human voice. As such, he conforms to Freud's definition which we have already encountered in the disability studies survey. Lionel is a character whose familiarity has been repressed in culture through devotion to an ideology of normality and in the individual through the mirror stage, but the uncanniness which he projects is slowly erased as we are invited to identify with him and to see how his 'strange' condition is mirrored in the world around him, around us. What instead becomes unsettled, alienated from human truth, as it were, are concepts such as wholeness, autonomy and normality, otherwise protected by 'the reality-knitting mechanism people employ to tuck away the intolerable, the incongruous, the disruptive.'

In this sense, *Motherless Brooklyn* is a Brechtian novel, which adheres to the tenets of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, concisely summarised by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle in their *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (2004):

Brecht's concern is to demonstrate that the 'real' is not something that is simply a *given*: it is not something definite and immutable, but is constructed through human perception, language, beliefs and assumptions, and consequently it is something that can be changed. (Bennett and Royle 2004, 35)

The reality which Lionel presents us with is likewise constructed through perceptions, language, beliefs and assumptions, but contrary to the institutionalised understanding of reality and its claim for universal validity, our narrator explicitly admits how his point of view is subjective in his reiterations of 'the world (or my brain—the same thing).' Through this subjectivity he challenges the objectivity of the 'real' as something that is simply given.

### ***Female Entanglements: Homosocial Quests and Illicit Sexual Desire***

The personal quest which has just been discussed is set in a typical urban hard-boiled crime fiction milieu of prevailing macho values and tough street smarts—both primarily inspired by Minna and imitated by the Minna Men—far removed from influences of more traditional female qualities. This lack of female values may indeed be one of the things to which the novel's title, *Motherless Brooklyn*, refers. In keeping with the characteristics of such a social milieu, the narrative presents us with only few female characters, most of whom exist only as shadowy figures at the very margins of Lionel's story. In fact, there are only two women who affect and play significant roles both in the murder puzzle and in Lionel's life.

The first of these is the *femme fatale*-like figure of Julia Minna, Frank's beautiful and seductive wife whom Lionel describes as '[...] tall, plush, blond by nurture, defiant around the jaw' (Lethem 1999/2000, 97) and who, as we see near the end of the novel, is quite capable of wielding a gun. In the first presentations of her, then, she seems to conform to the idea that '[...] women,' as Knight phrases it, 'especially seductive ones, are always a threat [...]', in some manifestations of the hard-boiled genre (here, he is referring particularly to Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer tradition), to masculinity and the potency of male values (Knight 2004, 123-124). Despite possessing some of the character traits of such a character, she turns out to be more a victim—a victim competent in the act of defending herself when really threatened, that is—of the 'games' of betrayal played out by the two brothers whom she in turn loves, and, as such, she is no source of evil or fatality within the story.

When the Minna Men are first introduced to her, following Frank's return to Brooklyn after two years in exile, they witness a marriage that is all but affectionate and loving, but rather marked by, as Lionel puts it, a '[...] long, dry stalemate' with only few glimpses of passion in '[...] their insults, their drab swipes at one another' (Lethem 1999/2000, 97). The failure of Frank and Julia to project an image of them belonging together, of being some kind of happy unity makes it impossible for Julia to become a mother figure for the four orphans in the same way as Frank is a father figure. Instead, the adolescent Minna Men begin to desire her as a sexual object, which our narrator also concedes:

If Julia and Frank had still been animated, quickened with love, we might have remained in infantile awe of her, our fascination and lust still adolescent. But the chill between them was an opening. In our imaginations we became Frank and loved her, unchilled her, grew to manhood in her arms. (ibid., 97)

More than just marking the onset of the boys' sexual interests in and desire for women, this quote points to an inherent homosocial quest within the Minna Men that entails the dream of usurping Frank as the head of the 'family.' Lionel admits as much when he tells us that '[i]n our dreams we Minna Men were all Frank Minna—that wasn't news. But now we shot a little higher: If we had Julia we would do better than Frank, and make her happy' (ibid., 98). The father figure is, like in psychoanalysis, both an ideal and an adversary (indeed, the situation seems to have some resemblance to the Oedipus complex), and there is an implicit homosocial quest among the boys to be loved by Frank but also to be better than him by succeeding in making Julia happy, something which Frank has failed to do.

In the final confrontation between Lionel and Julia, we in fact learn that Tony, Danny and Gilbert have all had their chance to live out this homosocial desire, since they have all been Julia's lover at some point: "So I fucked him", Julia tells our protagonist, referring to Tony, "I fucked a lot of guys, Lionel. I fucked Tony and Danny, even Gilbert once. Everyone except you. It's no big deal" (ibid., 296). The exception of Lionel from such carnal activities denies him the possibility which his acquaintances are granted—the story may indeed, to some degree, be read as a surrogate narrative act for partaking in the homosocial desires of expressing love for Frank and taking over his potent role<sup>21</sup>—and it furthermore illustrates the position of the deviant body as an illegitimate sexual object. Julia stresses this at an earlier point in the novel, when she explains why the two of them could never be an item: "You're too strange, Lionel. Much too strange. I mean, take a look in the mirror" (ibid., 105). We shall return to these issues shortly.

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<sup>21</sup> At the very end of the novel, however, Lionel seems to express acceptance that he is not to take over the role as lead detective in the Minna Men Agency, but must remain at the bottom of the hierarchy (see pages 304-307).



The second female figure that has a real impact in *Motherless Brooklyn* is the Zen student Kimmery, a much different character from that of Julia with her '[s]hort dark hair, squarish glasses' and her aura of sweetness (ibid., 5). Being initially a subject of interrogation for Lionel, the brief encounter between Kimmery and him turns into a short romantic fling, which becomes Lionel's only romantic involvement with a woman without the influence of alcohol. Where Julia, as we have seen, rejects the possibility of the act of sexual intercourse between her and Lionel on account of his strangeness, Kimmery is not put off by his abnormal behavioural exhibitions. On the contrary, she seems even turned further on by the tics which involuntarily erupts from Lionel, and especially by his strange utterances.

Engaged in mutual sexual pleasuring in Kimmery's apartment, they initiate an erotic discourse as well:

"I like, um, I like when you talk. When you make sounds."

"Okay."

"Tell me something, Lionel."

"What?"

"I mean, say something. The way you do."

I looked at her open-mouthed. Her hand urged me toward an utterance that was anything but verbal. I tried to distract her the same way.

"Speak, Lionel."

"Ah." It was really all I could think to say.

She kissed me graspingly and drew back, her look expectant.

"One Mind" I said.

"Yes!" said Kimmery.

"Fonebone!" I shouted. (ibid., 222)

Here, the abnormality of the protagonist becomes an obvious erotic fetishism, insofar as it obtains a central position within the sexual matrix and heightens the arousal of Kimmery as she approaches orgasm. In this way, the illicit, taboo nature of the narrator's strangeness, of his non-normality, is countered, but not effaced, by an acute erotic allure inherent in this deviance.

Such a double role is indeed not an uncommon phenomenon as regards the deviant body. In his study of freaks and the Freak Show institution, Fiedler notices that

[a]ll freaks are perceived to one degree or another as erotic. Indeed, abnormality arouses in some “normal” beholders a temptation to go beyond looking to *knowing* in the full carnal sense the ultimate other. That desire is itself felt as freaky, however, since it implies not only a longing for degradation but a dream of breaching the last taboo against miscegenation. (Fiedler 1978/1993, 137; original italics)

The gaze of the onlooker—a gaze which in the psychoanalytic tradition is always inextricably tied to erotic pleasure due to its involvement in a child’s first autoerotic interests and following inspections of genitals (this erotic pleasure of the gaze is also known as *scopophilia*)—may seek a knowledge of the Other and its disguised humanity which the epistemic instrument of sight can finally not produce, thus creating a desire for a more carnal approach. The scopophilia, then, is connected to a more primary desire, the *epistemophilic project* or the desire to know.<sup>22</sup> There are indeed hints of this desire to know in the situation leading up to Kimmery and Lionel’s carnal coming together, as their conversation revolves around the strangeness of other people; in fact, Kimmery says straight out to Lionel: “You’re strange to me” (Lethem 1999/2000, 218). It is the desire to know the familiar in the strange, then, that helps initiate the sexual act in the example above.

The spectacle of the freak, or more generally the deviant body, also becomes a particularly potent object of the erotic inasmuch as it is culturally perceived as more body or more beast than human, and, as such, is symbolic of uninhibited animal lust. Just after Frank has passed away, Lionel is sent to bring Julia the horrible news, only to learn that she already knows all about it and is preparing to leave Brooklyn. In the conversation that follows between the two, there is a strong sexual objectification of the deviant displays of Lionel’s body:

”Give me your hands, Lionel.”

I lifted my hands again, and she took them.

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<sup>22</sup> For a more elaborate account on scopophilia and the epistemophilic project, see Brooks 1993.

“God, they’re big. You have such big hands, Lionel.” Her voice was dreamy and singsong, like a child, or a grownup pretending to be a child. “I mean—the way you move them around so quickly, when you do, all that grabbing, touching stuff. What’s that called again?”

“That’s a tic, too, Julia.”

“I always think of your hands as small because they move so fast. But they’re big.”

She moved them to her breasts. (ibid., 103)

Just as in the Kimmery quote, a clear fetishising of Lionel’s abnormal manifestations is present, here in the form of his always rapidly moving hands. For Julia, however, the taboo of the deviant body is not to be transgressed, and she instead scorns his freakishness, possibly in compensation of the illicit desire she feels for him. Whereas Kimmery does pursue her fetish for the freakish, she nonetheless rejects him as a possible mate or boyfriend in the end, passing off their heated entanglement as just *a thing* (ibid., 309). Both of these rejections signal how the disabled, deviant or freakish body must be repressed from the legitimate matrix of love and suggest a continuing loneliness on the part of our protagonist. As Julia poignantly remarks about Lionel’s chances with the other sex: ““They might want you. I’ve wanted you a little bit myself. But they’ll never be fair to you, Lionel. Because you’re such a freak”” (ibid., 297).

### ***Postmodern Influences: Issues of the Symbolic, Ontological and Epistemological***

Much of the otherwise sparse criticism of *Motherless Brooklyn* has focused on the Lionel Essrog-character as a literary device that lets Lethem unfold his linguistic endowments or as a symbolic and metaphoric creation relating to the detective genre or the postmodern condition. To name a few examples, on the online Gale Literary Database, it is suggested that ‘Lethem takes full artistic advantage of Essrog’s illness by making him the novel’s narrator’ (Gale Literary Databases: Contemporary Authors 2007); Gary Krist in his review describes the compulsions of Tourette’s syndrome as ‘[...] a kind of kaleidoscopic metaphor, ultimately (and somewhat paradoxically) reflecting the fundamental ethos of the mystery genre itself: the compulsion to restore

order and rightness to a world thrown temporarily out of joint' (Krist 1999, Salon.com Book Review); and Bent Sørensen asserts, in his article 'Tourette in Fiction: Lethem, Lefcourt, Hecht, Rubio, Byalick', that '[w]hat marks this novel is Lethem's use of Tourette as a master metaphor for postmodern American society, and for the problems inherent in finding or constructing a stable identity in such conditions' (Sørensen 2005, 4; online pdf).

Such approaches to interpreting the deviant body partly reflect the prevailing tendency of literature to employ disability as an aesthetic function or a symbolic device, which we have already discussed. Indeed, Thomson notes that '[...] when literary critics look at disabled characters, they often interpret them metaphorically or aesthetically [...]' (Thomson 1997, 9), and, as such, they play a substantial part in maintaining disability as function or device rather than a human trait. Of course, most literary works that present us with disabled characters invite these readings, as for example in Robbins' aforementioned novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, in which the protagonist's enormous thumbs become a positive metaphor for the possibility of countercultural transformation—a possibility which the narrator sees as inherent in the deviant body.

In addition to the aesthetic and metaphoric positions of disabled characters, words that are synonymous with disability permeate all sorts of cultural discourses in their symbolic varieties. 'Blindness,' to name but one, has two proliferating antagonistic meanings in the Western world: from ancient Greek culture comes the notion of a connection between the lack of visual perception and special or superhuman powers of insight and wisdom, which co-exists with the equation of blindness with the failure to recognise something, to be unaware of something obvious, perhaps the more common metaphoric usage of the two today. In either case, blindness becomes Otherness, being claimed as a sign of either the superhuman or the subhuman, but never merely of the human.

Though we have seen examples here of symbolic representations that both lend a sense of special ability to impairments and evoke images of the disabled body as devoid of human qualities, mostly the connotations of disability-related words are acutely and unambiguously negative, as Davis also suggests through, among other engagements with cultural texts, a reading of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1990/1986):

The first thing I noticed about Conrad's work is that metaphors of disability abound. Each book has numerous of phrases like the following selections from *Lord Jim*:

a dance of lame, blind, mute thoughts – a whirl of awful cripples. (Conrad 1986, 114)

[he] comported himself in that clatter as though he had been stone-deaf. (ibid., 183)

there was nothing of the cripple about him. (ibid., 234)

Her broken figure hovered in crippled little jumps . . . (ibid., 263)

[...]. (Davis 1995, 44-45)

Conrad's use of these metaphors represents, as Davis also points out, '[...] limitations on normal morals, ethics, and of course language' (ibid., 45), emphasising how the disabled almost always stands in contrast to the finer virtues and qualities of the human species, not only in society but also on a linguistic level.

Regardless of the nature of the connotations, the intense metaphoric focus on disability ultimately flattens, uncomplicates and stereotypes our cultural understanding of human difference; it stresses impairments as defining, all-important character traits that engulf and erase other human qualities and abilities in a person, and thus helps create the idea of *a disabled person* instead of *a person with disabilities*. In a somewhat more cautious statement, Thomson argues the same, remarking that '[b]ecause disability is so strongly stigmatized and is countered by so few mitigating narratives, the literary traffic in metaphors often misrepresents or flattens the experience real people have of their own or others' disabilities' (Thomson 1997, 10). Therefore, we shall refrain from any such symbolic readings of Lethem's narrator-protagonist here, insofar as they relegate the deviant body and the experiences narrated from the point of view of the disabled to a metaphor for something else, and, particularly in relation to *Motherless Brooklyn*, they deemphasise the thorough and complex characterisation of the protagonist. Having said that, however, it does seem interesting to follow up on Sørensen's connection of Lionel's story with the tenets of the postmodern.

Standing in contrast to conventional crime fiction informed by rationality and revolving around an always capable detective, Knight explains that

[i]n postmodern fiction coincidence, overlapping accounts, indeterminacy are the plot motifs and parody, irony and inconsequence are technical tools to dislodge the idea of a single knowing and moralising subject, operating in ordered time and with purposive function. (Knight 2004, 195)

In this way, crime fiction influenced by postmodernist thought takes on the conventional form of, say, the hard-boiled sub-genre so as to disrupt some of the foundational beliefs upon which such fiction, as well as society as such, rests. It should be evident that this form of disruption is immediately related to much of that which we have discussed thus far in this chapter: coincidence is an issue that Lionel must continually confront, as we have seen, with his Tourette's propelling him into unforeseen and unplanned incidents—as when he is knocked unconscious by the Polish killer following a Tourettic eruption during a Zen meeting at the Yorkville Zendo (Lethem 1999/2000, 198-204)—and the critical stance this represents in relation to liberal individualism is indeed in line with postmodernism's assault on the 'single knowing and moralising subject.'

The overlapping accounts and dislodgment of the idea of a subject operating in ordered time, which Knight mentions, finds its equivalent in *Motherless Brooklyn* in the often fragmented and time-jumping chapters that are marked as much by flashbacks regarding Lionel's childhood and digressions about such ordinary things as food and music as they are by the progression of the murder case. This disorder in narrative style is, of course, mirrored in the disorder that constantly erupts within Lionel through compulsions and tics—the frequent digressions and jumps in time in his narration might indeed be understood as tics themselves—and together these manifestations of respectively a body and a narration out of control denaturalise the idea of order as *the* naturally organising principle in society, language and within human beings.

In its traditional form, the crime novel is a struggle to restore this naturalised order, but also a strenuous pursuit to reveal a concealed but ultimately reconstructable truth of the past—an evidently epistemological project; classic detective figures such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot

engage in a gathering of different pieces of evidence throughout their stories, which, when all put together and combined with rational thinking, allows them to finally unveil the mysterious circumstances surrounding the crime they investigate and to present the reader with objective, knowable truth. Postmodernist writing, on the other hand, is generally more concerned with the ontological dimensions of literature—exhibiting again and again a great eagerness to experiment with its formalistic features—which is bound up with a deep-seated distrust or even rejection of the notions of rationality, objective truth and a knowable past.<sup>23</sup> As such, a quintessential postmodern crime novel—if indeed one can speak of such a thing considering its experimenting nature—is subversive in relation to the tradition it takes on, both on the thematic and formalistic level.

Lethem's novel, however, is not such a quintessential example, being at once an admiring pastiche of the hard-boiled crime fiction tradition that Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett helped define and a form of postmodern meditation on and subversion of some of the general trends found in the work of these authors. Thus, while Lionel's story certainly has a distinct narrative style, due to postmodern and Tourettic influences, the ontological is never foregrounded to the extent that it becomes the primary concern of the novel; instead, it helps conceptualise the problems inherent in his identity quest, which are tied inextricably to the murder case, and outline how the truth that he is able to reveal in the end is not absolute and objective, but rather subjective and personal. This is evident, for example, in the last chapter of the book, when Lionel tries to tie up the loose ends of his story:

That left who? Only Ullman. I know he haunts this story, but he never came into view, did he? The world (my brain) is too full of dull men, dead men, Ullmen. Some ghosts never even get into your house they are so busy howling at the windows. Or as Minna would say, you pick your battles—and you do, whether you subscribe to that view or not. You really do. (Lethem 1999/2000, 311)

By Lionel's own admission we are made aware of the fact that one of the first clues to Frank Minna's murder has not been pursued or fitted into the puzzle, and therefore does

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<sup>23</sup> For a more thorough insight into postmodernist literature's relations with the ontological and epistemological see, for example, Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1999).

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not figure in the final version of truth with which he presents us. The truth as well as the world we experience through his narration is definitively personal and subjective, also underlined by the frequent reiteration in the book of the expression ‘the world (my brain—same thing).’ But though the story abandons, in the same manner as postmodernism, the idea of universal truths, Lionel’s epistemological project is not an unsuccessful one, insofar as it leads to the solving of the murder case and, perhaps more importantly, some sort of understanding and acceptance of himself and his “‘unique as a snowflake’”-nature (ibid., 82).

Similarly, although *Motherless Brooklyn* also complicates profoundly the seminal tenets of liberal individualism, it does not abandon all faith in the individual’s capabilities to manifest effective agency, but instead moderates this faith by showing how coincidences and an unyielding, out of control body reduces the autonomy of a character. Moreover, through Lionel we are shown the capacities inherent in those disabled figures that we normally isolate and pity at the same time as we are made aware of the vulnerability of those bodies regarded as normal. It is the ‘normal’ Frank and, then, his natural heir Tony who die, who become evidence of human mortality, not the abnormal bodies of neither the Tourettic Lionel nor the giant Polish killer.

Lionel, then, certainly reveals the illusory nature of a self informed by normality, individualism and rationalism, flaunting instead the incoherent, disordered and fragmented self that lurks behind the facades of normalised ideologies. Showing us how disorder is omnipresent in society (New York is Tourettic city, Prince’s music is Tourettic and so on), he demonstrates how the dehumanisation which he suffers throughout the novel is part of maintaining a form of reality that builds on such ideologies, a reality reinforced by reality-knitting processes, such as repressing the abnormal. At the end of the book, we can only seem to come to the conclusion that disorder is human and humanity is disorder.



## A Dialogue between the Carnavalesque and Disability

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

—Michel Foucault, *Truth and Power*

Though the Soviet theorist, philosopher and literary critic Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) began his remarkable writing career as early as in the 1920s, he was not discovered in the West until around the 1970s, when translations of his works finally made him accessible to the non-Russian speaking world. As his complete works span a wide variety of genres and subjects as well as displaying various influences, Bakhtin is not easily categorised as a theorist, which is clearly illustrated by the fact that he has been claimed, as Leitch *et al.* notice in their introductory remarks in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), as '[...] a formalist, a Marxist, a Christian humanist, a conservative, and a radical [...]' (Leitch *et al.* 2001, 1186). His theoretical position is further blurred by the controversy regarding the authorship of certain titles published under other names that some scholars argue should be ascribed to him.

His literary interests, however, can be said to share at least two distinguishing aspects: they are focused on the novel rather than on poetry and drama, and they are closely tied to that which Bakhtin calls the dialogism of a text. M. H. Abrams concisely explains this latter aspect in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999):<sup>24</sup>

To Bakhtin a literary work is not (as in various *poststructural* theories) a text whose meanings are produced by the play of impersonal linguistic or economic or cultural forces, but a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse,

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<sup>24</sup> For a more thorough insight into especially the dialogic dimensions to Bakhtin's work, see, for example, Michael Holquist's *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (1990/2002).

each of which is not merely a verbal but a social phenomenon, and as such is the product of manifold determinants that are specific to a class, social group, and speech community. (Abrams 1999, 62; original italics)

The theory of the dialogism of multiple voices and modes of discourse described in this quote also clearly informs the Bakhtinian concept we are interested in here, namely *the carnivalesque*. Bakhtin develops this concept through a reading of French Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais' (c. 1494-1553) work, focussing on how it is closely bound up with the folk culture of the carnival and those essential needs such festivities served. Medieval carnival culture, according to Bakhtin, was a celebration of all the aspects of life repressed in official culture, and displayed a unique form of human interaction that was characterised by a turning upside down of social hierarchies, liberation of alternative truths and voices and a revelling in the grotesque and vulgar; at carnival, the people were free to mock and subvert all that was considered official and authoritative, thus creating that which Bakhtin terms *a second world*. Literary depictions and expressions of such a culture is that which we refer to when we speak of the carnivalesque.

All of the central concerns of the carnivalesque seem immediately related to those issues in which disability studies scholars are interested, and as such it becomes a potentially valuable concept with which to approach fiction featuring deviant and disabled characters. But while disability studies is inextricably interwoven with political agendas, many commentators emphasise that Bakhtin is not interested in politics per se. As, for example, Selden *et al.* remark in their *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1997), Bakhtin did not treat

[...] literature as a direct reflection of social forces, but retained a formalist concern with literary structure, showing how the dynamic and active nature of language was given expression in certain literary traditions. (Selden *et al.* 1997, 42)

Aesthetics and formalistic features, then, are the real interests of Bakhtin. This is probably the reason why some conservative commentators have become dismayed by the many appropriations of his literary concepts for especially cultural- and identity-political purposes. Nevertheless, the carnivalesque with its subversion of official culture

is so entrenched in political issues that it seems perhaps even more suitable for an explicitly political approach than one that pretends to be merely descriptive of structures and evaluative only in relation to literary quality.

What is intended here, then, is certainly related to identity-political purposes insofar as it draws on the insights of disability studies in its appropriation of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. Taking the form of a type of dialogue among some of the seminal remarks that the Soviet scholar made about the carnivalesque, some of the view points presented in our survey and, of course, Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn*, the following does not pretend to be an in-depth analysis of Bakhtin's work *Rabelais and his World*; nor does it try to present a particularly informed point-of-view on general Bakhtinian thought. Our scope here is simply too narrow, both in the spatial and the temporal sense, to permit any such undertaking. Instead, we shall attempt a somewhat fragmented, thematic and ultimately eclectic approach with the sole purpose of shedding a different, but informative light on our understanding of disability within the covers of Lethem's novel. Firstly, we shall be looking at some of the general aspects of the novel vis-à-vis Bakhtin's elucidation of the carnivalesque, but also in relation to the American carnival culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Subsequently, Lionel's manifestations of Tourette's syndrome will be attempted analysed as potentially being of a carnivalesque nature and discussed as a countercultural element.

### ***Carnivals of Participation and Carnivals as Representation***

The carnival culture which Bakhtin finds in Rabelais' work and in the culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is quite unlike that which we associated with the Freak Show manifestations in the disability studies survey: as we remember, the American carnival culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a phenomenon involved in confirming and maintaining the normal self faced with Otherness, through processes that relied on the staging of the expositions of carnival as objects to be grasped and contemplated through the senses, particularly the visual one. Otherness, in other words, became a specular spectacle, an object of representation.

In Bakhtinian terms, this means that the carnival has become *authored*, realising Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's claim that carnival participants '[...] can always be transformed from active and equal subjects into the objects of a representation constructed by an author who chooses to place himself above and beyond the scene of carnival' (*in* Jefferson 2001, 214). Consequently, the American carnival is fundamentally imbued with hierarchical structures that separate the objectified performers of the Freak Show from the empowered, authoring spectators. Indeed, this separation was the main idea behind putting the human curiosities on display, as we have already seen. Asserting and manifesting the prevailing truth of society, the truth of normality, that is, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century carnivals seem to resemble Bakhtin's description of the official feasts of the Middle Ages:<sup>25</sup>

Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was a triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable. (Bakhtin 1968, 9)

The folk culture of our time, of which carnival is representative, has become entangled with the ideologies of the more official culture, underlining instead of undermining the 'truth already established.'

Bakhtin's description of the Rabelaisian carnival, on the other hand, is characteristic in the way it differs profoundly from modern carnival expositions. For one thing, it is marked by participation, dialogue and unity between those two groups whom we today separate;<sup>26</sup> in fact, one important point of the true carnival spirit is that there is no such distinction between performer and spectator, that is, all within the carnival space are equally subsumed into the festivities and become one with it, as it were. As Bakhtin puts it,

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<sup>25</sup> The official feasts were those sponsored by the state or of ecclesiastic or feudal origin.

<sup>26</sup> American carnival culture was also involved in creating a sense of unity, but not one that embraced human difference; it was a unity formed on the basis of rejecting that which was regarded as ultimately Other, serving to enforce the natural superiority of the white American people. For further explanation see, for example, McGowan 2001.

[...] carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. (Bakhtin 1968, 7)

If more modern carnivals are made up of spectacles from which those attending ultimately distance themselves, then the version Bakhtin unfolds for us here is a form of reality that must be lived through participation, experienced through total immersion, without hierarchical influences.

The purpose of such a carnival culture is very different from that which we have seen turn human difference into spectacles. Labelling it as ‘a second world and a second life outside officialdom’ (ibid., 6), Bakhtin explains its necessity as a contrast to the official culture and ideology of the feudal societies, in which laughter could replace seriousness, equality the fixed hierarchies, vernacular billingsgate and indecent expressions the formal language of Latin and so on. Accordingly, the carnivalesque—the literary manifestation of such a carnival culture—is often understood as a countercultural phenomenon, turning the established, official world upside down or inside out. Bakhtin states as much, saying ‘[the folk culture of carnival] is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a “world inside out”’ (ibid., 11). As such, it also becomes clear that the second world exists only in a symbiotic relation to the first, creating a space for the expression of all those human longings, aspirations and truths that are repressed within the official culture.

Put another way, the carnival culture was all about liberation from the hegemonic ideologies and truths that pervaded the culture of that time, which Bakhtin also stresses in his book:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (Bakhtin 1968, 10)

The deliberate suspension of all that was established as truth, which is depicted here, help make apparent the overlapping interests of disability studies and the carnivalesque: they are both concerned with forms of human expression that exist in opposition to the prevailing ideologies and norms of their contemporary societies, thereby challenging the hegemonic institutions of the status quo; and liberation of people from predefined, unfitting and ultimately confining societal roles is their common agenda.

In particular, the carnivalesque becomes interesting vis-à-vis cultural representations of disability in its form as a literary mode that, as Abrams puts it, introduces '[...] a mingling of voices from diverse social levels that are free to mock and subvert authority, to flout social norms by ribaldry, and to exhibit various ways of profaning what is ordinarily regarded as sacrosanct' (Abrams 1999, 63). The occurrence here of the words 'profane' and 'sacrosanct' signals how the rebellious nature of the carnival culture was directed at religious societies, where the church was an enormously powerful institution, influencing every aspect, more or less, of everyday life. Disability studies, on the contrary, faces an altogether secularised society, but with an ideology of normality that probably interferes as much in our daily lives as religion did in the past. Taking into consideration these shared interests, the carnivalesque may be a fruitful approach of interjecting a critical, disabled voice into a literary tradition that, in Davis' words, is marked by '[...] normative [structures], ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her' (Davis 1995, 41). In the following, then, we shall focus on certain general aspects of *Motherless Brooklyn* that are related to this general description of the carnivalesque.

As we have seen, Lionel is an isolated character that lives at the very margins of society, either ignored and disregarded—'A Touretter can also be The Invisible Man', he tells us (Lethem 1999/2000, 44)—or perceived and treated as human anomaly, as a Free Human Freakshow, in the words of Minna. In cases of the former, his existence is barely acknowledged within culture, while in cases of the latter, he becomes just that which his nickname implies: a representative of the type of Otherness put on display in American carnivals, a spectacle to be represented through the normative gaze. Through his narration, however, he evokes images of the carnivalesque, and as such begins to liberate himself from the role of the spectacle and the deviant body as representation,

both in relation to the reader and in his comprehension of himself. One way in which he achieves this is through the transformation, which we discussed in the former chapter, from the passive role as Minna's court jester to an acting and, in the Bakhtinian sense, *participating* detective—a transformation that is, of course, in line with Bakhtin's description of hierarchies being turned upside down. In fact, Lionel begins to partake or participate in a wide variety of cultural functions available within the hard-boiled genre: womanising (he unconventionally, yet successfully seduces Kimmery (ibid., 218-222)); interrogation (one example is when he confronts Gerard at the Yorkville Zendo (ibid., 228-236)); storytelling (in his position as the protagonist-narrator); conversation with men of power (that is, with the Italian mobsters (ibid., 172-177)); stalking and car chase (he follows Tony and the giant Polish killer to Maine (ibid., 245ff))<sup>27</sup> and so on. The active, participating deviant body, then, no longer is an object represented in literature, but becomes a subject that operates outside the established hierarchical structures of self and Other.

While this change in roles involves him becoming a first-person narrator, this does not result in his story being told through a single voice, something which for Bakhtin would mean it was undialogic (*monologic*, that is)<sup>28</sup> and uncarnavalesque. In fact, the narration consists of a myriad of voices that intermingle in various patterns, both disrupting and supporting the voice of the narrator. Firstly, we have the multiple voices of Lionel himself, in form of his Tourettic outbursts that are always disrupting his narrative voice; his numerous references to Frank Minna-expressions, such as the frequent 'Tell your story walking' or 'Wheels within wheels' (at times it almost seems as if Minna is speaking through him); and his many intertextual references to crime literature, as for example at the end of the novel when he cites Philip Marlowe: '("About the only part of a California house you can't put your foot through is the front door"—Marlowe, *The Big Sleep*)' (Lethem 1999/2000, 307). In addition to the multiple voices of Lionel come all the voices of the different characters of the novel, ranging in social level from orphans, Zen students, market-owner, police detective to wealthy Italian mobsters. Indeed, *Motherless Brooklyn* is such a mingling of voices from all

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<sup>27</sup> This car chase is different from the one appearing at the beginning of the novel in that Lionel is the one behind the wheel, he is active, whereas he is confined to a passive role in the first chase.

<sup>28</sup> Monologic novels, as the term implies, are distinct in the way they attempt to subordinate the different voices with which they inevitably present the reader to the purposes of the author.

social levels, which Abrams describes, most of which actually mock authority, to some degree, through their violations of order through criminal actions.<sup>29</sup>

What these characters (apart from Lionel, of course) do not mock, however, is the authority of the ideology of normality. The vast majority of them instead become ardent defenders of normality in their confrontations with Lionel, disparagingly outlining him as Other—Julia tells him he is ‘[...] such a freak’ and Matricardi calls him ‘inhuman,’ ‘a beast,’ and ‘a freak of nature’ (ibid., 297 and 177)—or, as a more loving gesture, naming him Freakshow and Crazyman, as do Minna and Zeod. All of this we have discussed before, of course, but it becomes interesting here because it conforms to Bakhtin’s notion of how an effective critical discourse must consist of both the official truth of culture (in our case, the hegemonic notions of normality) and that which is excluded and invalidated by this truth. As Clair Wills explains in her essay ‘Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria and Women’s Texts’ (2001),

[i]t is only by bringing the excluded and carnivalesque into the official realm in a single text that the concept of public discourse may be altered (so texts written solely in the vernacular would be too far outside the official realm to have an effect). (Wills 2001, 86)

In this line of thought, literature that neglects to present the official realm, revolving instead only around the carnivalesque, are easily discarded as they do not engage with reality as it is officially accepted, and thus become mere fantasies.<sup>30</sup> For Bakhtin, the dialogic relation between the official and the non-official is crucial in literary attempts to evoke the counterculture of the carnivalesque.

With such an emphasis on dialogue between the hegemonic and the repressed, carnivalesque counterculture resembles one of the approaches used by postcolonial literature in its critique of Eurocentric historiography, literature and culture and the forced influences such concepts have had on post-colonial countries. In a book entitled *Post-Colonial Transformations* (2002), Bill Ashcroft argues that one of the most potent forms of response of the post-colonial world to the hegemonic position of European

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<sup>29</sup> In relation to this, we might also see Julia’s failure to comply with our *femme fatale*-expectations of her as a mocking of the conventional role of the sexual aggressive and attractive woman as a dangerous creature.

<sup>30</sup> Here, we might be reminded of Spivak’s somewhat related remark that ‘[d]econstruction can only speak in the language of the thing it criticizes [...]’ (in Selden *et al.* 1997, 226).



master narratives has been the *counter-discourse*, which is characterised by working within the frame and form of Western narratives whilst simultaneously foregrounding the constructedness of those assumptions and conventions on which these narratives are founded. A prominent example of this is Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981/1995): merging realism with magic realism, historiography with personal narrative, Western culture and language with Eastern culture and language, Rushdie creates a novel in which official truth is exposed to be no more valid or meaningful than its ethnic, unofficial counterpart. *Midnight's Children* can in fact be construed as a very carnivalesque work with its mixture of a plenitude of voices and cultural and narrative forms, which its narrator, Saleem, seems to suggest at the very onset of his narration:

I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me; and guided only by the memory of a large white bedsheet with a roughly circular hole [...].  
(Rushdie 1981/1995, 9-10)

Making the reader swallow similar multitudes, *Motherless Brooklyn* works in the same dialogic way, and it is precisely in the carnivalesque meeting of the voices and forms of the normal and the abnormal that we see the normal in the abnormal and vice versa. There is no final authored reality in Lethem's novel, no unifying of voices and truths, exemplified in the conversation during a poker game at the very end:

"Forks and spoons," I said, slapping my hand down to show the card faces.

"Jacks and twos?" Gilbert inspected my cards. "That won't do it, Freakshow." He tossed down aces and eights. "Read 'em and scream, like the maniac you are." (Lethem 1999/2000, 306-307)

Though Frank and Tony are gone, and Loomis (the previous Garbage Cop) has joined the new Minna Men, Lionel nonetheless remains a freak in the eyes of the other characters; they retain their point of view, their truth, as it were. From a Bakhtinian view, then, Lionel's counterculture, counter-discourse, succeeds in humanising him and erasing his extracultural status because it is juxtaposed with antagonistic truths and not presented as an authoritarian reality.

## ***Remnants of the Carnavalesque in Tourettic Behaviour***

With the purpose of drawing, in her own words, '[...] an analogy between Bakhtinian carnival, hysteria and women's text in terms of their capacity to disrupt and remake official public norms [...]', Clair Wills theorises, in her aforementioned essay, hysterical female manifestations as potential remnants of the carnival culture and potential sources for dissolution of official hierarchies (Wills 2001, 85). Evoking a Freudian proposition that the liberating nature of carnival lives on in the human psyche in form of the hysteric, she outlines certain radical female texts as possibly having the capacity to transgress the cultural boundaries of female oppression. Whereas we have just focused on elements of the carnivalesque as occurring on thematic and formalistic levels of *Motherless Brooklyn*, we have not looked at Lionel's Tourettic behaviour as a manifestation of the carnivalesque. Taking our cue from Wills' essay, we shall do just that in the following, not, it should be stressed, with the intention of making Lionel's disorder into a symbol of transgression, but more in an effort to show how it is at odds with all levels of that which Bakhtin terms as officialdom and suggestive of another, more liberating view of the body.

In the previous chapter it was tentatively suggested that the disordered narrative structure of Lionel's narration might indeed be seen as correlating with his disordered behaviour as such, that his flashbacks and digressions are urges, like, for example, his '[...] urge to shout in the church, the nursery, the crowded movie house' (Lethem 1999/2000, 2). If we accept such an interpretation of the non-linear temporality that Lethem consistently makes use of in *Motherless Brooklyn*, then it becomes interesting to discuss this in relation to the sense of time that existed at the carnivals of the past. Bakhtin explains that the carnival feasts were

[...] essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness. Moreover, through all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. (Bakhtin 1968, 9)

This sort of cyclical time stands in contrast to official, historical linear time that underlines existing hierarchies and power structures through the teleological ideology with which it is bound up, situating crisis as a thing of the past and insinuating a certain form of completeness of the present. In linear time, there is a clear distinction amongst past and present and future, whilst in carnival time these exist in close proximity to and interrelation with one another. '[H]ostile to all that was immortalized and completed', as Bakhtin tells us, the cyclical time of carnival reminds us of the unstableness of existence, of change, renewal, of life and death all at once.

Lionel's compulsive evoking of images from the past throughout his narration creates a similar form of time that erodes the notion of crisis and change belonging to the past. In fact, his present, revolving around his identity and murder quests, is very much influenced by and shaped in dialogue with flashbacks that deal specifically with crises and changes. For example, his short spell, at the age of twelve, of kissing the other orphan boys at St. Vincent's, of '[...] lung[ing] at someone, surround[ing] him with [his] arms, and kiss[ing] his cheek or neck or forehead, whatever [he] hits', becomes as important in his search for identity following Minna's death as do the decisions he has to make regarding his investigation (Lethem 1999/2000, 45). These memories of crises and changes are all connected to the development of his Touretic self and his 'adoption' into the Minna Agency, and, as such, they have to do with origins and concerns of belonging, just as the part of his story that temporally unfolds from Minna's death and onwards. The past events, then, emerge not in accordance with cyclical time either as they are evoked thematically by present events that relate to various points in the past. A form dissolution of all schematic understandings of time is at work here, rejecting both progressive and cyclical temporalities for a more fragmented and disordered one. The issues Lionel must negotiate in order to successfully 'tell his story walking,' to come to terms with his new position in life, cannot be untangled from such a relation to time nor from the specific memories he relates. Thus, the narrative structure of *Motherless Brooklyn*, like (and yet unlike) carnival time, challenges the assumption of the past as completed and conquered and stands out from a normative point of view as acutely disordered.

The disordered narrative, then, becomes essential for the story of disorder, the story of Lionel's disorderly body. This body is in many ways comparable to Bakhtin's

description of the grotesque body or the body of grotesque realism that thrived in pre-Renaissance art and culture. Blurring the borders between demarcated bodies, between body and bodies, the grotesque body is, like cyclical time, representative of incompleteness and is probably best understood through Bakhtin's presentation of two figurines of senile, pregnant hags from a terracotta collection:

There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its twofold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body. (Bakhtin 1968, 25-26)

As all other parts of the carnival, this concept of the body stands in contrast to the official conceptions of society, here, in particular, to the notion of the whole, completed and individualised body, but also to its invulnerability with the juxtaposition of decaying flesh and pregnancy. Likewise, Lionel's body fails to conform to prevailing conceptions, as we have already seen, especially in relation to liberal individualism, and instead flaunts similar forms of duality and the transgression of borders of the individual body in relation to its surroundings.

The latter is especially evident in the example we looked at earlier in which Lionel compares himself to a Green Hornet-type figure:

Here's who I was instead: that same coloring-book outline of a man, but crayoned by the hand of a mad or carefree or retarded child, wild slashes of idiot color, a blizzard of marks violating the boundaries that made *man* distinct from *street*, from *world*. (Lethem 1999/2000, 226; original italics)

Though there is no melting together of bodies in this example, the blurring of Lionel's outline, the violation of boundaries between body and world, signals the same as the grotesque body, namely an incomplete and open body which cannot be fixed or understood as stable and complete. Moreover, this inability to clearly distinguish Lionel from his surroundings makes it difficult to see him as an object of representation, since representation is always, Jefferson reminds us in an essay entitled 'Bodymatters: Self

and Other in Bakhtin, Sartre and Barthes' (2001), a finished construction (Jefferson 2001, 217).

Disregarded as illness of the body in modern culture, these uncontrollable Tourettic movements that render Lionel's body unfinished and incomplete indeed seem, if we are to follow Wills' arguments, to be remnants of the carnivalesque. In this line of thought, it might perhaps be suggested that if, as Bakhtin proposes, '[...] the one-sided character of official seriousness [...] led[s] to the necessity of creating a vent for the second nature of man [...]' (Bakhtin 1968, 75), then the rigid confines of 'too much perfection,' a surface 'already buffed smooth,' of 'ducks already orderly' (Lethem 1999/2000, 1-2), necessitates his 'grotesque' behaviour; in other words, his Tourettic compulsions and verbal outburst become vents for an inherent nature that modern society represses—a nature that, in the eyes' of the normative, must be treated, eradicated or ignored.

This is, of course, also indicative of the negative connotations which the word 'grotesque' has today. But while it in contemporary society points to something unnatural and unpleasant, it was once considered, as Bakhtin remarks, deeply positive, depicting bodily life as fertile and abundant (Bakhtin 1968, 19). With the onset of Renaissance culture, however, a new way of understanding the human body was born that gradually eradicated the positive values of the non-canonical body. Accordingly, Bakhtin points out that

[t]he Renaissance saw the body in quite a different light than the Middle Ages, in a different aspect of its life, and a different relation to the exterior nonbodily world. As conceived by these canons, the body was first of all a strictly completed, finished product. Furthermore, it was isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies. All signs of its unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation eliminated [...]. (ibid., 29)

In the same manner that the concept of the normal body disabled bodily variations, so too the ideology of the Renaissance body began to strip the grotesque of its original positive meanings, making it into something macabre rather than something connected to all bodies. As a consequence of this, all signs of bodily incompleteness became stigmas of Otherness instead of manifestations of the second life of the people.

The tension between the classic Renaissance body and its grotesque opposite is also evident in Lionel's story. Having rejected mind numbing drugs as a cure, Lionel is nevertheless drawn towards activities that still his symptoms for a short while and let him shed the grotesqueness of his body. Paradoxically, however, at least two of the most effective activities in this regard are connected to processes in which his body is acutely open and indistinct in relation to other objects, and, as such, it remains in the realm of the grotesque: 'Food really mellows me out,' Lionel remarks after having stuffed a White Castle burger into his mouth, pointing to how the activity of eating stifles his Tourette's, or at least his verbal syndromes (Lethem 1999/2000, 2). From the White Castle burgers, Zeod's various sandwiches and the mass-produced Oreos to exotic Japanese *uni* and the kosher-food at JFK Airport, much of his narration is indeed preoccupied with food, both the contemplation of it and the act of eating it. The latter is part of grotesque realism's presentation of the body, insofar as it focuses on bodily processes that are open and in contact with objects that blur the boundaries of the self. Bakhtin says of the grotesque that '[t]he stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world' (Bakhtin 1968, 26). Lionel's consumption is an example of the world entering the body, and with such a focus on the openness of his body the notion of completeness is rejected.

Sex is the other activity that, as he explains, stills his

[...] Tourette's brain, not by numbing [him], dimming the world like Orap or Klonopin, those muffling medications, but instead by setting up a deeper attentiveness in me, a finer vibration, which gathers and encompasses [his] urgent chaos, enlists it in a greater cause, like a chorus of voices somehow drawing a shriek into harmony. (Lethem 1999/2000, 103-104)

His inner stirrings feel like chaos in situations in which they are at odds with that which he should be projecting—normality, that is—but under circumstances where the blurring of the self's borders are acceptable, during intercourse, for instance, the chorus of voices living within him seem to come together in harmony. Here, the stress is, of course, on a body part that goes out to meet the world, so to speak,—never mentioned by its name, but euphemised as 'a beer can' and 'a beer can that's been crushed' (ibid.,

221)<sup>31</sup>—and thus he again violates the notion of the complete body. Manifestations of the grotesque, then, appear to be sources of alleviation for his syndrome, inasmuch as they allow his body to be in a state of incompleteness, to stand in contrast to the illusion of the finished body, which, in turn, is suggestive of how we may indeed see his Tourette's as a carnivalesque spirit instead of only an illness.

Most of Lionel's compulsions, tics and obsessions, then, can be interpreted as a form of repressed carnival spirit in need of outlets or of vents to express an inherent part of that which it means to be human. Like Wills' proposition about hysteria, Tourette's syndrome seems to embody some of the main tenets of the carnivalesque, profoundly countercultural in its displays of an incomplete and open body with blurred boundaries in relation to its surroundings. As such, the Tourettic body becomes an entity that demands liberation from confining cultural ideologies of body and reality. In *Enforcing Normalcy*, however, Davis shows little faith in the liberating powers of the carnivalesque, stating that

[w]hile the term 'grotesque' has had a history of being associated with this counterhegemonic notion of people's aesthetics and the inherent power of the masses, what the term has failed to liberate is the notion of actual bodies as grotesque. (Davis 1995, 151)

His point is that although modernist and postmodernist art have presented the disabled as appropriations of the grotesque these attempts have failed to evoke the same countercultural spirit as that existing in the Middle Ages, resulting in pitiful or repulsed responses instead. 'The grotesque [...]', he concludes, 'is seen as a concept without the redeeming sense of class rebellion in Bakhtin's formulation' (ibid., 151). In *Motherless Brooklyn*, as we have seen, pity and repulsion give way to understanding and empathy through an utterly compelling story of human ability and, just as importantly, human inability to conform to the ideology of normality. Moreover, a reading of Lethem's novel that is attentive both to the issues of disability studies and the context and

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<sup>31</sup> The reluctance to mention the penis by name does not conform to the carnivalesque penchant for revelling in billingsgate and vulgar language and expressions with the purpose of accentuating and celebrating the positive aspects of the lower bodily stratum—a part of the body predominantly repressed in official culture. Lionel's euphemisms can be seen as his attempt to censor vulgarity, whereas his straightforward expressions of 'Eat me!' and the like may reflect an inner urge to revel in the forbidden grotesque vision of the body.

implications of the carnivalesque, such as that which we have attempted here, is indeed capable of accentuating rebellion and liberating forces as inherent in bodies deemed deviant. As Thomson points out, '[...] because the disabled figure always represents the extraordinary, such interpretations [interpretations that see the disabled body as bearers of fresh views on reality] open the way for us to imagine narratives of physical disability other than deviance and abnormality' (Thomson 1997, 38).



## Conclusions: The Humanity of the Other and the Other in Humanity

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.

–Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*

Prompted by an interest in the cultural impact of the concepts of disability and normality, this master's thesis set out to discuss how Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* turns upside down literary conventions of depicting disabled figures—conventions marked by disability's function as spectacle at the margins of literature that confirms the validity of normality and evokes responses from pity to horror—through the positioning of the Tourettic Lionel Essrog as the protagonist, narrator and private-eye of the novel. It was proposed that these atypical roles of a character suffering from a disorder allows Lethem to complicate the way we understand normality and disability and to unveil for us the humanity of the Other and the Other in humanity. In order to undertake such a task, we went to great lengths to describe and discuss the tenets of the newest academic field of the humanities, namely that of disability studies. This endeavour made it possible to conceptualise and frame the central themes of Lethem's novel within a larger cultural debate about the properties, meanings and values assigned to bodies.

Drawing on a wide range of texts that problematise the deviant body, we have established how disability studies, inextricably tied to a political movement that seeks to liberate people with impairments from discrimination and cultural oppression, begins to deconstruct the naturalised binarisms of normal/abnormal and abled/disabled. These designations of human beings are instead revealed to be social constructs formed in dialogue with especially statistics, eugenics and the industrialisation of the Western world. Through an institutionalisation of such constructs, the normal body has become

the standard of humanity, whereas impairments are viewed as pathology, as a disease of the body, and thus emphasised as marks of sub-humanity. Consequently, people with disabilities have been condemned and banished to the very margins of society, where they have haunted our culture as repulsive figures of Otherness. This condemnation, we have seen, is intimately bound up with the danger and power of acknowledging the disabled figure as a part of culture and a part of every one of us, insofar as it reminds of us of our fragmented self and vulnerable, uncontrollable bodies. Literature, then, as well as other forms of cultural discourses, has traditionally, save from a few mitigating examples, kept the threat of the Other at bay by alienating it and erasing all human aspects of it by focusing entirely on its difference.

Most of the issues raised by disability studies were important points of discussion in both of the following analytical chapters. In the first of these, we focused on how genre conventions of hard-boiled crime fiction are used by Lethem to subvert the pitiful role of a disabled character, but also to show the extent to which the life of a person with a disability is shaped by cultural responses evoked by that condition. Lionel's existence is one marked by isolation and ostracism from a world that fundamentally does not understand him, nor even attempts to do so. Thus, in society he is regarded only as the Free Human Freakshow or Crazyman, such as his nicknames suggest, and his non-normal behaviour must either be labelled as Otherness or forgotten altogether lest it threatens the existing ideology of the body. In this way, the novel demonstrates how the greatest pain of Lionel's disorder is not the essentialist aspects to it, but rather how it is received by the surrounding world.

The derogatory meanings imbedded in his position as Other is that which his narration begins to break down, as he substitutes the passive and stereotypical role of object and spectacle for one of agency, action, centrality and depth. The typical normative gaze infused with prevailing ideologies is reversed so that we are presented with a point-of-view that is capable of deconstructing dichotomies of us/them and normal/disabled. As we begin to see how Lionel's tics are not absurd, but rather revealing of a part of his unconscious that speaks and acts through uncontrollable outbursts and movements, and are introduced to his all too human concerns and thoughts, our understanding of him as an alien creature, subhuman at best, becomes

unfitting. Instead, he stands out as a complex and compelling character whom we might indeed see some part of ourselves in.

The identification with Lionel, which initiates a deconstruction of our culturally determined comprehension of disorder, also leads to a critical perspective on some of those governing principles that profoundly influence everyday life. This is evident, for example, in the way that our protagonist draws attention to the illusory aspects of American liberal individualism by showing us how the body is not the always yielding instrument of the mind, but susceptible to uncontrollable external as well as internal factors. The body and mind of Lethem's detective provides an insight into both the repressed vulnerability of our flesh and bones and the fragmented nature of self, whilst also maintaining the capacity of the individual, even of a defect individual from a normative perspective, for effective agency and influence on his surroundings. In a sense, then, *Motherless Brooklyn* presents us with a moderated form of individualism, into which the disabled body can fit along with the normal one. And the desire to fit in, to find origins and a place in life is exactly what the novel is about—a quest that is constantly intertwined with the acceptance of manifestations of Tourette's syndrome.

In the second analytical chapter, we discussed the story of our Tourettic hero in relation to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. Broadly speaking, this allowed us to conceptualise Lethem's novel as countercultural in the way it subverts conventions and ideologies and to comprehend Lionel's disorder as inherently human, as a representation of quintessential human needs which official culture represses. The countercultural aspects, it was argued, are apparent in the transition of the disabled figure from a position of representation, an object to be gazed at, to a participating character who is neither relegated in relation to the reader nor the 'normal' characters. Traditional hierarchies of normal/disabled are turned upside down through this transition, and the voice of the Other is allowed to coexist with the other voices that are imbedded in a more normative view of the world. As such, there arises a form a dialogue between the official truth of normality and the personal truth of disability with which Lionel presents us. This dialogue is necessary inasmuch as it serves to frame the countercultural truth within the existing and accepted structures of reality and thus makes it harder to pass it off as mere fantasy.

The countercultural dimensions were, of course, also evident in the chapter's second section which focused on the inherent human aspects of Tourette's syndrome. Here, we saw how the narration of the story of disorder takes the form of a disordered narrative that breaks with linear as well cyclical time and instead has a thematic and continually unresolved relation with the past. This reflects how the past is not something which has been conquered, but that rather coexists in some form with the present—a coexistence which plays an integral part in human experience of time according to Bakhtin's description of the unofficial culture of man. The violation of progressive, linear time, then, is related to a deeply human experience of how the past interferes with the present. Likewise, Lionel's other violations of normative standards appear to be outlets for a repressed part of that which it means to be human. His bodily disruptions of wholeness and autonomy, for example, points to the grotesque body's openness and incompleteness that in turn is representative of how we in some situations experience our own bodies. Overall, our reading of the carnivalesque elements both of Lionel's narrative and his Tourette's syndrome as well as the discussion of *Motherless Brooklyn* vis-à-vis crime fiction genre conventions demonstrates how the novel reveals the humanity of the Other and the Other in humanity.

## Summary

This master's thesis investigates representations of disability and normality in Jonathan Lethem's acclaimed detective novel *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999/2000) with the aim of showing how this narrative resists the predominant literary usage of disability as a stereotypical entity and spectacle that works to reinforce normative ideology and validate the normal self, while instead liberating a figure of disorder to speak, act and contemplate the world around him. Moreover, the thesis discusses how this liberation allows us to rethink both our perceptions of figures of Otherness but also the naturalised structures and ideologies of reality which we usually accept as universal.

Focusing on literary engagements with disability and normality, the fairly new academic field of disability studies becomes the obvious choice of theoretical approach with its interest in how and why specific meanings are assigned to normal and disabled bodies. The thesis presents a concise overview of the dominant concerns, arguments, theories and terminologies of disability studies in form of a survey, exploring especially the notion of disability and normality as social constructs; Otherness as a repressed form of self; literary traditions vis-à-vis the disabled figure; and, finally, more political aspects concerning discrimination and civil rights.

Framed by the cultural insights that this field of study offers, the thesis contains two separate but to a great extent overlapping analytical chapters. The first of these examines the genre conventional dimensions of Lethem's (quasi) hard-boiled fiction novel and how these are used and subverted in the quest of breaking down the walls between Other and self. I argue that, through his transformation from being an absurd court jester at the margins of society to becoming a potent private eye, narrator and protagonist, and through his narrative in general, the Tourettic Lionel Essrog begins to dismantle the image of him as an uncanny character of Otherness. Instead, he makes us see his inherent humanity, as well as drawing attention to the constructedness of such ostensibly natural structures and ideologies as reality and normality. To this end, we look at how *Motherless Brooklyn* engages with such themes as the dualistic relationship between body and mind; the deviant body in the matrix of desire and the hierarchy of homosocial relations; and the relations between Lionel's condition and narration and the characteristics of postmodern storytelling.

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The second analytical chapter introduces Soviet literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *the carnivalesque* and attempts to create a dialogue among this concept, disability and Lionel's narration. Based on a reading of French Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais, the theoretical contemplation which underlies the carnivalesque allows us to conceptualise *Motherless Brooklyn* as a countercultural narrative that expresses repressed needs and experiences of man—repressed by official culture and its structures of truth, that is. Moreover, I argue that it is possible to see Lionel's manifestations of Tourette's syndrome as remnants of the carnivalesque, and that they as such are fundamentally human and not alien such as our culture conventionally views disabilities and disorders. Broadly speaking, then, this master's thesis concludes that *Motherless Brooklyn* challenges hegemonic cultural understandings of the concepts of normality and disability through a narrative that shows the humanity of the Other and the Other in humanity.

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