

The “senses” often are treated by science, medicine, and humanistic scholarship as a phenomenon affecting distinct individual bodies, but much contemporary scholarship has revolutionized how we think about the senses. For the past few decades, at approximately the same time that disability studies has developed as an academic discipline and professional field, the “anthropology of the senses” has grown in importance and has contributed to the emergence of the interdisciplinary field known as sensory studies (Bull et al. 2006). New work in sensory anthropology challenges not only the five senses model but also the notion that the experience of sensing is individualized and distinct. For example, while the term “senses” typically connotes the five modalities of hearing, taste, touch, smell, and sight, our capacities for sensory experience are not confined to these discrete channels. Humans actually possess and rely on far more than five senses. This becomes more clear when we acknowledge both exteroceptors and interoceptors—the former being organs that process olfaction, gustation, aurality, tactility, and viscosity, and the latter referring to processes such as the vestibular system, kinesthesia, and proprioception (Geurts 2002). In addition, human sensory experience is even more complex if we are willing to include phenomena such as pheromone receptivity or a biosonar capacity called “echolocation.” Any and all of these biological systems, however, can become impaired. For this reason, there is an obvious

yet often neglected relationship between thinking about the senses and human experiences of disability (blindness and deafness being exceptions, since medicine has traditionally classified these conditions as “sensory impairments”).

In the past few decades, sensorial anthropologists have argued for the sociality of sensations and the intersubjective dimension of sensory processes and experience. As David Howes, one of the pioneers of sensory studies, puts it: “To a greater or lesser extent, every domain of sensory experience, from the sight of a work of art to the scent of perfume to the savor of dinner, is a field of cultural elaboration. Every domain of sensory experience is also an arena for structuring social roles and interactions. We learn social divisions, distinctions of gender, class and race, through our senses” (2003, xi). Still, the phenomenology of the senses has not been, generally speaking, as thoroughly engaged by scholars in disability studies as it might be.

Some senses have, by necessity, been used in autobiographical and narrative writing in relation to disability; accounts of “blindness” and “deafness” as well as forms of mobility impairment or neurocognitive difference always draw on the senses to establish traction. For example, Helen Keller organized her autobiographical account *The World I Live In* (1908) around classic sensory modalities. She described how her “seeing hand” guided her through the material world and how those tactile views could, in turn, stimulate her mind and imagination. With olfaction so vital to her experience, she reflected on why smell had been relegated to a “fallen angel.” In many ways Keller deployed sense-based analogies to stress how she was more like her readers than they might think: “I understand how scarlet can differ from crimson because I know that the smell of an orange is not the smell of a grapefruit” (1908, 105). Jacques Lusseyran’s *And There Was Light* (1963)

recounts his first twenty years, including an accident in a schoolyard that transformed his limited eyesight into blindness. As a small child he held colored crayons and blocks in his hands, bringing them close to his eyes, to experience “light.” He could identify various buildings throughout town by their smells—a perceptual experience undoubtedly shared with sighted people, though their awareness of it may not be as keen as Lusseyran’s. Denying that blindness is even an impairment, Lusseyran asserts, “The only way to be completely cured” of blindness “is never to treat it as a difference, a reason for separation, an infirmity. . . . The cure is to immerse oneself again and without delay in a life that is as real and difficult as the lives of others” (36).

The sensorially rich narrative accounts of Keller, Lusseyran, and others help readers to understand that despite their impairments, these disabled individuals continue to share with all humans the spirit and consciousness that mark our species. Jean-Dominique Bauby’s autobiography *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (1997), for example, sensuously depicts his experience with locked-in syndrome: he had no ability to speak and virtually no capacity to move, he was deaf in one ear, and he had both a numb zone and an area with some feeling on his face. Humanity often deems a person in this state to be a “vegetable,” but Bauby’s autobiography reveals that despite his locked-in syndrome, he continued to experience intense pleasure through conjuring up vibrant sensory imagery.

Yet the sensory autobiography approach to disabled experience has some inherent limitations. It has been referred to by some as auto/somatography and characterized as a genre of writing “devoted to exploring bodily experience” and to depicting “lives distinctively shaped by anomalous bodies or unusual somatic conditions” (Couser 2009, 164). Although the writing or the prose in these works is often lyrically descriptive and

sensual, for some scholars such “autopathographies” often seem to hew too closely to the medical model of disability’s understanding of the body rather than to that of the social model.

Furthermore, disability studies has intentionally downplayed attention to the senses because of its commitment to advancing the social model of disability. As Mitchell and Snyder have argued, disability studies “strategically neglected the question of the experience of disabled embodiment in order to disassociate disability from its mooring in medical cultures and institutions” (2001, 368). Detailing the sensory experiences of anomalous/monstrous bodies arguably was a form of exotifying and fetishizing, or else putting a microscope to disabled people’s sensory-affective experiences for the voyeuristic use of the audience. From such a position one could conclude that disability is an individual experience that does not require social action and structural change. Mitchell and Snyder further argue that “since disabled bodies had endured such a history of debilitating classifications, disability studies purposely refrained from formulating the embodied experiences of disabled people. This neglect was willful and strategic: it explicitly sought to leave an overanalyzed entity mercifully alone” (374). For decades, therefore, disability studies actively discouraged a phenomenological or sensory approach, favoring instead political accounts that focused on social exclusion.

Some feminist theorists within disability studies have consistently critiqued this avoidance of sensory/embodied elements (e.g., Shildrick and Price 1998). In “Sensing Disability,” Marian Corker argued that ignoring sensibility perpetuates “masculinist notions of presence, visibility, material ‘reality,’ and identity as ‘given’” (2001, 39). Corker’s powerful “critique of ontological imperialism” suggests that even disability studies has promoted an understanding of “being” that reifies

bifurcation, ocularcentrism, and stable or fixed realities. The masculinist “givenness” that she points to underlies the way that our understandings of presence, visibility, material reality, and identity deny mutability, fluidity, and transience—all of which come to the fore when we focus on the senses and sensory practices. “Sensibility” by necessity is premised on the understanding that biological difference and sociocultural difference are mutually constitutive so that one’s body and one’s sociocultural surroundings change continuously (36). Feminist scholars in general rejected pathological constructions of the female body, as well as overdetermined notions of the female or feminine. But when it came to eliding sensation, Corker argued that the “dis-abling of sensibility effects a closure on valuable, insightful, and imaginative ways, *sensed* ways of being and knowing that can make collective expressions of disability more responsive and responsible” (42).

As the sensual revolution in scholarship has spread, disability studies has responded by fusing poetics and politics and attending simultaneously to sensory practices and social critique. For instance, in *Too Late to Die Young* (2005), Harriet McBryde Johnson broaches hard-hitting topics such as disability legislation, selective infanticide of disabled infants, and muscular dystrophy telethon fraud even while acknowledging the importance of sensory perception and human sensuousness. Michael Schillmeier’s *Rethinking Disability: Bodies, Senses, and Things* (2010) exemplifies the potential to explore and theorize how sensory practices can enable and/or disable. He shows how close study of the relations among bodies, minds, senses, and things is necessary for a deeper understanding of “the social” and the ways in which “inclusive differences highlight the connection between human and non-human relations that make up the different enabling and/or disabling scenarios of societal realities” (167). These are exciting critical moves,

for they demonstrate that sensory studies and disability studies can stimulate growth through cross-fertilization. A disability studies perspective is vital for sensory studies to stay grounded in the difficult political reality of diverse human bodies consistently experiencing exclusion in social organization across the globe. And sensory studies can encourage scholarship in disability studies to continue pushing human sensuousness—in all its myriad forms—as a critical research agenda.