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WHAT MISFITTING MAKES

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APOLOGIA

What you have here are some misfits. One might read this essay about misfits as itself a collection of misfits, attempts to fit some square pegs of content into some round holes of form. The essay here began as an academic paper that offered the critical concept of *misfits* and *misfitting*. From there, the concept expanded in response to my colleague Gail Weiss's entreaties into an eventual publication more than a decade ago in an academic journal (Garland-Thomson 2011). From there it migrated to a lecture at the bidding of my colleague Joel Reynolds at Georgetown University for a conference called "Fits and Misfits: Rethinking Disability, Debility, and the World with Merleau-Ponty." The genealogy of *misfits* arrives to you, Dear Reader, as perhaps the final version of the square peg of that in-person lecture fit here into the round hole of an open access online academic journal.

The pushings and pullings of this enterprise, the shovings and swearings of such a layered conversion, bear witness to the convergence of form and content my talk-turned-essay here reaches toward. My reach, unfortunately, may very well exceed my grasp. Invoking this hackneyed metaphor of one's reach exceeding one's grasp to signal excessive human ambition has always galled me. From the ancient didactic tales of Icarus or Pandora to the murkier lessons we now agonizingly extract from the egotism of Elon Musk or Vladimir Putin, our shared literary and philosophical tradition offers us a rich diversity of cautionary tales about the disasters that follow the persistent hubris of pressing beyond human embodied limitation. Everyone's reach eventually exceeds their grasp.

Many people with disabilities inhabit bodies that do not fit the received tales of wisdom or pronounced truths of the ascendant majority. Such is the case with me, your wise author who accompanies you through this essay. My reach, quite literally, exceeds my grasp. This situation is no case of hubris but rather one of disability. I get no moral benefit of hubris undone from the embodied experience of my perpetually graspless underreach. Let me explain. The human variation we now call congenital disability endowed me with what I

have come to call unusual, asymmetrical arms and hands. I've developed this self-description in response to the continual demand of interlocutors to know what I "have" or more rudely, "what is wrong with me." Over my many decades I have been obliged to give an account of myself, sometimes with words but more often with the visual inquisition of stares that range from sincere interest to creepy fascination, diagnostic expertise, maternal concern, and genuine human empathy (Garland-Thomson 2009). This situation unfolds out of the relationship between my embodied experience of the world and the normative rhetorical and material demands of the reach-exceeding-grasp cultural sagacity. I am perhaps, then, a phenomenological case study in the most fundamental sense: the particular form of my particular body in particular moments and places shapes my particular consciousness. In other words, my bodily experience of reaching and grasping in the world structures how I recognize, incorporate into consciousness, and act upon the received didactic narrative about the gap between an aspirational reach and its realization in the gratification of intention embodied in a successful grasp.

Like my phenomenological overreach, the misfitted jumble I offer you may seem perplexing, even incoherent. To continue the metaphor, the mess of pegs and holes comprising this essay fit together awkwardly, their clarity perhaps dim and elusive. You will find here much explication but little argument. You will also find some wonderful, compelling images available to you as links. If you spend time with print academic journals, you know that the images they present are almost always small, grainy, and unsatisfactory. In contrast, *Puncta*'s digital format affords you access to the compelling images my presentation slide deck offered my in-person audiences and which are now available to you. As a scholar of literature and culture, my true reach is to open a portal to reveal an object's meaning-making work by explicating texts, images, and objects by "reading" them intently and creatively (Garland-Thomson 2015). This methodology of the literary scholar is the knowledge skill I bring to the enterprise of academic research and teaching.

What you have in this essay is a set of readings, explications of idiosyncratic objects, images, and texts drawn from my own experience and interests. To continue my embodied metaphor, I am reaching here to show you that these are instances of misfitting. My gentle assertion is that these misfits are not mistakes, violations of cosmic order, or random incoherence but are generative. These misfits, in other words, hold the potential for new meanings. What you have here then is a concatenation of misfits. Like my arms, this assemblage of words and stories strives to do my distinctive intended work in the world. And like my body in the world, this essay is an overreacher, attempting more than it can achieve, aspiring to more than it can fulfill.

Like my awkward reaching, misfits are often awkward encounters, graceless engagements between things in the material world that end in an incongruent relationship. In putting forward the critical concept of misfitting, I focused on materiality as an adjustment to the prevailing linguistic turn in social constructivist theory. As feminism did, I aimed to put some flesh on the linguistic turn in critical theory. I confess to you now that my lifetime of awkward reaches doubtlessly gave shape to the concept of misfitting. Little of the world was designed and built with my arms and hands in mind. And of course, this revelation is eventually shared by everyone over a lifetime, since the myriad misfits between body

and world come to all of us. Even though the fundamental human misfit is between flesh and world, I found suitable a perhaps more accessible metaphor to suggest the situation of misfitting. The futile attempt to fit a square peg in a round hole was my crude image to bring the dynamic material world into our focus. To consider how we might allow lives and communities to flourish for all, I proposed the situation of how human bodies engage with built material environments as a felicitous case study. What we think of as disability materializes both in experience and meaning when our body-minds encounter a misfit, when a secure and seamless relationship between embodied self and world breaks apart. To expand the image of misfitting, consider the metaphor of a wheelchair rolling up against a stair. Both scenes are vivid narratives of misfitting, easily available to the archive of human experience from which we individually and collectively take knowledge and make meanings that structure our understandings, actions, and relations to others. Such scenes and stories of misfitting, then, make up the ethical work my theoretical concept undertakes.

Misfits are situations of asymmetries in scale and shape. Round and square, large and small, intricate and gross, textured and smooth: misfits testify to the enduring hold of the immanent upon the transcendental. Nothing, it would seem, is itself a lone thing in the world; everything, it would seem, is in an awkward relationship with something else. The minute we shift our consideration from singularity to plurality, we run up against a misfit. Like my body, misfits manifest the principle of asymmetry rather than the ideal bilateral symmetry science deems to be the fundamental natural principle that organizes living things. Like my arms—or really, anybody's—in a gesture of relatedness, the two elements in relationship do not fit together with the elegant matching of the steepled hands of academic contemplation, the praying hands of supplication, or any other handed gestures of emphasis such as the tiredly repetitious side-by-side two thumbs up or the exaggerated double middle finger one often observes drivers recklessly aiming at their fellow commuters during a rush-hour backup. The virtue of asymmetry that a misfit manifests, then, is that it interrupts rather than affirms natural patterns. Misfits contradict the assumed evenness of the natural and social order.

Let me shift the concept of misfitting from what it is to what it makes, to what I have called misfitting's generative potential. Scenes of misfitting—the dynamic, lived human encounters between bodies and world—make meaning. We recognize our lived human embodied existence through the form we experience it, through making it into a story with the temporal and spatial dimensions of human experience. We observe, interpret, and know the world around us and our place in it by way of story, which is the epistemological organization of our sensory and cognitive engagement with the world. For knowledge to manifest into conscious and meaningful action, we translate raw human experience into narrative form with characters, setting, plot, and dialogue. In other words, representation structures reality, making narrative the fundamental epistemic form of human embodied experience. Making meaning from human embodied experience is what the medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum (1999) elegantly expresses as shape (or body) carries (or structures) story (or

meaning).[1] What I am drawing from Bynam suggests that the particularity of human shape, our wondrous diversity often celebrated in human story, is most epistemologically apparent and ethically relevant when it comes into human focus through experiencing misfitting. My work converges with that of Bynum in that we are both narrative humanists, scholars who consider the meaning-making work of representation, of human-made language, images, and objects. This enterprise of story making endows the material world with coherence to make it usable for actions that reach toward human flourishing.

In the spirit of considering the ethical work of misfitting and what misfitting makes, I offer here two stories of the many instances of beneficial misfitting, of how a misfitting encounter makes a potential usable human good. One story is charming and personal and the other capacious and universal. These stories are of misfitting gain—to borrow from and allude to Deaf gain and disability gain, meaning a material situation that increases rather than reduces human flourishing.

THE ROMANCE OF NORM MATES AND MISS FITZ: A STORY OF MISFITTING GAIN

My first story shows how misfitting generates new language, how barriers to intentional human action can be remade into new paths opening toward human purpose. Misfitting, you will recall, is a materialist understanding of disability drawing from lived, situated experience in which the particularities of embodiment interact dynamically with their environment in both time and place. My misfit story begins with the primal scene—universal in some version to everyone—where our bodies encounter a machine, a man-made tool designed and marketed in today's modern liberal capitalist social orders to make our lives better. All machines, or what we now call technologies, promise benefits that, when delivered, often at the same time impose harms. Think of atomic energy, cars, plastic, opioid medicines, and our computers. This clash of opposing substances—of organic flesh and inorganic material stuff—takes various forms over the time and place of our lives. This collision of body and world shapes our embodied selves and the journey that is our lives.

My misfitting story begins with the unusual shape of my hands and arms, a rare and distinctive form for which almost all tools are not designed. A simple implement like a spoon offers service to me; a typewriter is a mechanical nightmare. Both assume normative embodiment, movement, and pace, but a typewriter is much more demanding and less flexible than a spoon, especially an adaptive (often elegant) spoon designed to serve a wide range of hand shapes and capacities. With the ascendance of inclusive design that the disability rights movement and its accompanying regulations provided to the disabled and the disabled-in-waiting came accessible technologies of every kind designed to accommodate the widest possible range of human variation. The rigid, exclusionary machine that was a typewriter (now sentimentalized in lucrative retro forms) gave way to

[1] See Bynum's (1999) Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities. Bynum uses the verb *carries*, rather than *structures,* in describing the relationship of stories to shapes. I have adapted her phrase by using the alliterative term *structures* rather than *carries*.

computers, more flexible and refined machines for the increasing text making demands of modern life and work. With the increased complexity of computers came the benefit of voice activated programs that liberated me from the misfit between the design of my body and the design of a keyboard-driven machine. Nevertheless, as the historian Susan Strasser (1982) has shown in her history of housework, aptly called *Never Done*, our modern liberal capitalist societies swamp us with products that both reduce and increase the demands they are created to alleviate. So even while the computer gave me more effective text input by taking my words out of my hands and putting them into my mouth, the demands for text output and manipulating this machine—which has increasingly become the center of our lives—outpaced any relief from misfitting that my dictation software program aimed toward turning into a good fit. My disability, my unfitness for the misfit between my body and my machine, thus became the cliched canary in the coal mine, warning of the inevitable escalation of misfits between bodies and machines that modern mechanized life demands of us.

Living with misfits can be isolating, even when we are surrounded by fellow humans quietly and often desperately struggling to achieve unattainable fits. Redemption from the frustrating sense of aloneness that often accompanies misfits came to me from a communal triad of disabled women engaged by necessity in the disability innovation that often emerges in inaccessible work environments. A richly elaborated communication relationship of novel workarounds and good humor evolved among two other disabled colleagues and me who use accessible technologies and communication preferences that at once complement and conflict with one another. One of us is a sign language using Deaf woman with two hands and sturdy fingers who communicates most comfortably and effectively by typing. Another of us is a blind woman who prefers spoken and haptic engagement with her computer. I prefer to speak to machines to create text communication through dictation or talk-to-text programs. In other words, for us to do our work, one of us touches her machines, another's machine talks to her, and my machine listens to me. We speak about our relationships with these machines in terms of our preferences rather than our limitations to emphasize our adaptability and resourcefulness. These machines were not made with us in mind. Each of us misfits with what our machines expect from us; yet each of us has created from that misfit both innovative ways of using machines and distinctive narrative and rhetorical forms that our embodied relationships with our machines generate. Our complex communication patterns with one another are gains, not deficits. Our misfits have made something good in the world (fig. 1).

The relationship between my computer and my body is a misfit that bonds me with my colleagues and is an occasion for creativity. Even when this misfit leaves me depleted and despairing, it simultaneously delights me with the vivid new language it provides. The inherent quirkiness of voice input, or what I prefer to call talk to text, is an enlivening poetics, a narrative creativity, and a knowledge enterprise that sterile mechanical typewriters could never extend to me or my interlocutors. One misfitting gain is a distinctive semantics of misfits between my body and my machine. This misfitting semantics emerges from the fluency I've developed over years of talking rather than typing into my computer; indeed, I am often garrulous enough to create this unintentional fresh expression in the

Figure 1. Three friends at the FDR memorial.

form of charmingly hilarious words and phrases. Talk to text technology relies on sound and prediction based on the words it has accumulated in one's personal vocabulary; it has no sense of actual meaning or any intelligence. So it makes sound-based, or homophone, errors that people who use spoken and written forms of language would never make. It's perplexingly hopeless with the small words that connect the primary meaning-making words of a language, like "by" or "an." I sent a message once, for example, intending to say that I would be "in touch by email" but my technology wrote that" I would be "in touchy pie email." A fully hearing person native speaker would never make such errors, which is why they seem so novel. Deaf people, I have learned, often have no difficulty with the homonyms that plague hearing writers because they experience no conflict between the written and spoken version of words. Hearing people can laugh at ourselves via my talk to text poetics. Hasty enunciation on my part, for example, has rendered "humanities" into "you manatees." I favor the adjective "celebratory" which often gets written out as "Celebra Tori," vaguely suggesting a porn star name. The Mellon Foundation comes out regularly as "melon" or even occasionally "smelling foundation." Unintentional truths frequently

emerge, as if Freudian slips. I once sent my academic colleague an email in which I had intended to say that I would "craft a memo" about some tedious administrative issue, but my talk to text said that I would "crap a memo," which my colleague immediately grasped as an oxymoronic accuracy about the situation.

Name crossing from talk to text is particularly creative. For example, my dictation often translates the name of the famous neurologist writer Oliver Sacks into "all of her socks." The academic theorist Jasbir Puar becomes "jazz beer poo are." The phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty becomes "Merlot Panty." My professional dictation program Dragon NaturallySpeaking refuses obscenity, but the sassy Siri button on my phone swears like a sailor. Reminding my children in a text message to remember their grandfather on Veterans Day, I intended to note that he had fought in three wars, but my dictated iPhone message told them he had "fucked in three wars." Technologies have cursing profiles that are apparently tailored to intended audiences. I had to use my one good finger to type out "fucked" in this document in which I am otherwise fluent. My Microsoft Word spellchecker, however, tells me that what I just keyed in "may be offensive to my reader."

From this misfit semantics, my composition practice has generated not only engaging words and phrases but an entire Romance, a fanciful story elaborated among misfits about misfits. One day while quickly dictating a message, I spoke in a single sentence two words from the critical vocabulary I have contributed to disability studies. The words are "normates" and "misfits." Instead of these critical terms that my dictation program might have recognized, onto the screen flew the characters of my new story: Norm Mates and Miss Fritz (I promise that I did not make this up!). A great name for a rock band perhaps, but soon enough I began to imagine these two misfits as a romantic couple. From this narrative prompt, I was reminded of the clever romance plot anthropologist Emily Martin (1991) offers in her classic analysis of the metaphor's meaning making work, "The Egg and Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles." Martin's capacious rhetorical scrutiny shows us how culture shapes the ways biological scientists describe the natural world and human body.

Gender stereotypes, Martin shows, hide within scientific language considered objective and possessing truth value. The scientific explanation draws on a traditional cultural gender binary that characterizes men and women not just as opposites but as differentially valued antitheses. In other words, our supposedly objective knowledge system of science draws on patriarchal narratives of men and women to interpret human bodies and their functioning. According to what Martin identifies as the Romance narrative that science imposes on human reproduction, men produce enormous quantities of resourceful, energetic, and determined sperm, whereas women are born with a limited cache of rapidly deteriorating, listless, and static eggs that impassively await a date for the prom. Syntax, semantics, and grammar carry out the romance narrative to give cultural meaning to scientific description (Martin 1991, 489). In this story as science, passive verb constructions instruct us that the feminized egg "is swept" along her way in the process of fertilization, whereas active verb constructions "propel" or "deliver" sperm to "penetrate" their target. Even the egg's active verb is passive: she "drifts." Adjectives do similar gendering work. Sperms are "strong" and "streamlined," propelled by "whiplash-like motion and strong lurches." In contrast, eggs

sit primly and wait to be asked to the prom. We are firmly in the story of Disney's 1950s Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, told in the rhetoric of medical education and scientific fact. What we see in this romance is fantasy shaping fact. This scientific fairytale of the romance between the sperm and the egg reveals that the cultural work of metaphor does the ideological work of verifying supposed objective scientific truth. In what Joseph E. Davis calls medical sciences' rhetorical production of "all pathology all the time," we see the narrative effect of switching from one rhetoric to another, of the meaning-making function of translating a scientific truth into a familiar romance story (2021, 1).

My point here is that the experience of misfitting makes things in the world. My misfit semantics generated an epistemological concatenation (the first try of this admittedly pretentious and obscure word produced "content an nation") on the meaning-making work of language. Norm Mates and Miss Fitz emerge as characters from my embodied misfit with technology; these novel characters invoke the possibility of an ironic romance; the meaning-making work of the misfit between science and patriarchy emerges; the cultural work of a romance plot beckons to me.

Thrilled with my misfit romance, I offered it up to my Deaf and my blind colleagues. Perhaps, I suggested, we could do something generative, even charming, with the auditory cousins Norm Mates and Miss Fitz. Touching the microphone icon lurking at ready in the lower right-hand corner of all my iPhone screens, I spoke the names into a text message to my blind friend so she could tell us what her screen reader voiced. The two of us—one blind and one sighted—engage in an ongoing experiment to see how the words and the emojis that I speak or touch into the text messages to her translate when she hears them via the phone application she uses to render texts into auditory language. I will often speak an emoji description, for example "bread emoji," then send it to see if the intended meaning in the communication chain from me to her through our technology reaches her intact. I will send a text or an emoji, and then call her on the phone to ask what her screen reader actually said to her. "Misfits" and "normates" are homophones, auditory cousins hard to tell apart. So, we were curious to know how my phone talk to text would translate into my blind friend's text to talk technology. To our amazement, when she spoke the semantic cousins into her phone, they translated perfectly into "normates" and "misfits" written out onto my screen.

Intrigued by the narrative potential of this unlikely couple, my Deaf friend spun out a new literary romance from the misfits, Miss Fritz and Norm Mate (fig 2). A Jane Eyre riff emerged as a video from my Deaf friend, which is an appropriate technology for deaf people who consider themselves "people of the eye" instead of being reliant on the ear for communication. In my friend's video, Miss Fritz becomes a principled governess fed up with the aristocratic buffoon Mr. Norm Mates, who is forever galloping across the heath astride his stallion with his flowing cape and spurred boots rather than attending to the derelict manor house Miss Fitz must manage. We generated together an archive of misfitting gain, linguistic and literary forms emerging from our literal crossing of perspectives, producing a network of what disability resourcefulness and delight offers.

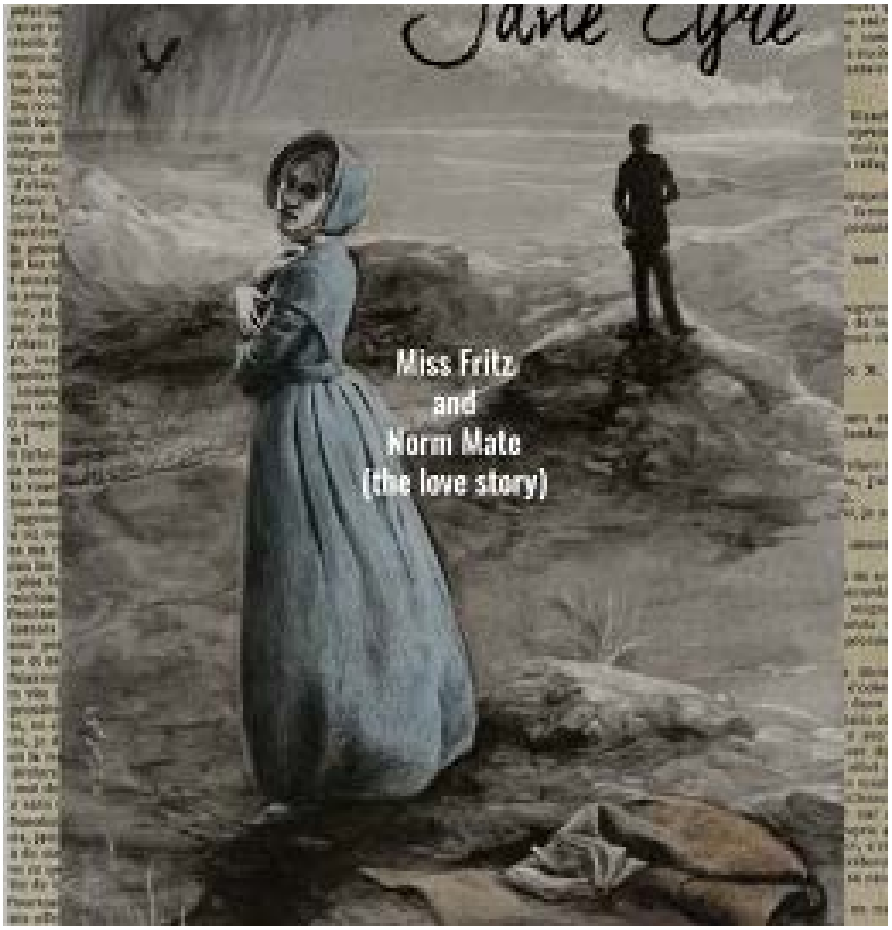

Figure 2. Still image from "Miss Fritz and Norm Mate: The Love Story." Brenda Brueggemann, Youtube, Oct. 12, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=we_i0-BkvMc.

MISFITTING HARM

My misfit Romance is a gain because it makes a story that brings more benefit than harm, although disentangling those outcomes from any act in the world is complicated. Juxtaposing the misfit Romance of Norm Mates and Miss Fitz with the Romance of the Sperm and the Egg suggests the complexity of the work of story in the world. My story of misfitting gain should be taken as well as a cautionary tale about how representation carries out the cultural work of structuring reality that benefits or harms human communities. My misfit Romance benefits the enterprise of critical disability studies and promotes inclusive design development. Martin's romance of the sperm and the egg reveals how the cultural work of representation can harm human communities.

In a 2020 paper about the metaphor of gene editing, I suggested that comparing microscopic surgical procedures performed on human biological matter to an everyday large-scale material process like editing text on a computer can lead us to believe that these medical procedures using the so-called tools of gene editing are much more stable, exact, and safer than they may actually be. Metaphors do the narrative work of assuring us that this biological process is a stable and predictable mechanical process, but they also shape the moral and ethical decisions we make. We need to recognize that the materiality of our human biology constitutes a constraint on our understanding. Such an acknowledgment of human phenomenological and epistemological limitation can, and perhaps should, lead us to an ethically necessary humility about the extent of human control over the consequences of medical scientific enterprises. And to honor human limitation in this way is also to honor the ethical commitment to humility ensconced in the Hippocratic vow to *first, do no harm*. This first principle of medicine elevates the caution of nonmaleficence over the aspiration to beneficence (Beauchamp and Childress 2013, 149). Before we consider the benefits of our eager strides to develop and implement technologies that shape the outcomes of human lives and futures and the future persons included in our human communities, we may be wiser to carefully consider the harms.

MISFITTING GAIN

One way to characterize bioethics, the field to which I contribute now, is that this knowledge-making enterprise considers what harms and benefits come from actions taken in the name of medical science and healthcare. Although misfitting might cause harm, as with any action in the world, it has the potential for benefit as well, often benefit intertwined with harm. The experience of misfitting can teach us about being human. Misfitting forces us to recognize the fundamental distinction between flesh and world, and with it both the limits and possibilities of the human capacity to act and to be. The fundamental misfit all humans share is that we emerge from the sheltering womb into a material world that is indifferent to our individual existence. This is the tradition of humility expressed in the rhetorical forms of both Vanitas and Memento Mori. Misfitting witnesses a truth of human existence: our bodies are contingent and evanescent. One misfitting gain might be the human potential to develop an epistemological nobility born of this sobering phenomenological recognition of contingency, fragility, and the limits of what we take to be freedom and autonomy. We have a received and widely available narrative archive of humility gained from misfitting. Think of Oedipus, Icarus, or Jesus. Indeed, such cautionary tales are a predominant narrative genre in the literary archive, ranging from Aesop and Sophocles through F. Scott Fitzgerald and Gwendolyn Brooks. What I'm calling misfitting gain may also support the counterintuitive proposition I have put forward elsewhere that there may be benefit in conserving rather than eliminating the human variations we think of as disabilities, that witnessing, recognizing, and sustaining disability can be a source of human connection and virtue. As a bioethicist, I have made the case for disability as a resource to be conserved rather than a liability to be protected. Our disabilities witness the fundamental misfit between flesh and world, and

the lives we make with our disabilities witness the human capacity to endure, often with grace and compassion. Conserving rather than eliminating disability could offer the human community often unbidden opportunities for unexpected resourcefulness or flourishing that disability can present. The benefits of conserving disability are accepting people with disabilities who enter our lives as unexpected and often unwelcome gifts and valuing the inevitable growing into disability inherent in the human condition (Garland-Thomson 2012).

PIETÀS: MISFIT ICONOGRAPHIES OF CARE

My second story of misfitting gain is an application, perhaps an implementation, of the misfit knowledge I've described as a potential opportunity to witness human limitation. As I've made clear, my explication here of misfitting's generative potential draws on the methods of literary and cultural studies, of the meaning-making work of representation. I reach here to a received representational narrative—one of perhaps many misfitting case studies from the received and familiar cultural tradition of our time and place—to suggest the didactic potential of misfitting. My example here is a scene of misfitting that has great cultural authority in the Western tradition and that has been reiterated in multiple forms enough over the last centuries in the West to have become a generally recognizable story, composed in this case of an image that carries the cultural clout of the sacred.

The cultural work of representations that have didactic authority is the focus of several academic enterprises ranging from art history to semiotics, literary criticism, aesthetics, and museum studies, performance studies, and sociological inquiries such as social interactionism, among other traditions. What I offer in my concluding example of the generative potential of misfitting can only gesture to the kind of rigorous analysis these academic traditions offer.

With these caveats in place, I conclude this meditation on beneficial misfitting with the imagistic didactic cultural narrative of the story of misfitting depicted in the classical Christian sculptural tradition of the *Pietà*. Perhaps the most familiar iteration of the *Pietà* in our contemporary space and time is from the Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo Buonarroti whose 1498 marble sculpture of the Mother of God embracing her dead son, Jesus (link 1), represents one of Western tradition's central stories of human experience. This iconic choreography of lamentation from the Christian narratives of birth and death is a pictorial narrative, rather than a linguistic narrative like the ones my dictation offers.

My narrow reading here of the *Pietà* focuses on how the misfit between flesh and world I've described might be understood as generating a narrative that suggests the right ethical relations between persons. The strength of this image as a didactic narrative comes from its iteration in varying forms across time and space, in other words in the pervasive repetition, legibility, recognition, and familiarity that makes it available to be repeated in a way that strengthens whatever didactic work people intend or find in the imagistic narrative.[2]

[2] Think of the most generative reading of Walter Benjamin's (1968) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

Michelangelo's *Pietà*, which I begin with here as the prototypical image in our cultural moment, presents a story told through the representation of two bodies, one living and one dead, in an embrace of bodily care. Drawn from the Christian narrative of human form made sacred through divine authority, this narrative scene presents the human condition rendered in great complexity. The mother here embraces her lifeless son to whom she gave life. The mother in this domestic scene holds her grown child on her lap. What I call this choreography of care parallels the many Madonna and child representations so familiar to the Western eye. These choreographies of care, ranging from the Madonna mother figure presenting the infant Christ to her nursing the child, all follow a choreography in which the viewer is asked to witness an act of maternal care that appears as an embrace of bodily care and comfort.

The familiar Madonna and Child images represent the bodily care necessary to sustain life at its beginning. The *Pietà*, in all its iterations, represents the bodily care necessary at the very end-of-life, not to sustain a new life, but rather to honor and properly care for the human body in its final pose of mortality. Both the Madonna and Child and the *Pietà* arrange the two figures in a holding embrace choreographed or arranged according to the size of the child and the adult that the maternal figure embraces.

In the *Pietà*, the maternal caretaking figure presents the body of the grown child as an offering to us to witness human mortality. She both displays and enacts the fleshly connection, this bodily entanglement between the two of them. Theirs is a duet, a *pas de deux*, an embrace, a holding that lightly refers to other iconic sculpture ranging from classical Greek mythology to the romantic era's Rodin's *Kiss*.

The *Pietà* is a story told through an image. The story is a secular choreography of care made sacred through the Christian narrative. Divine authority sacralizes the traditional work of body care assigned to women throughout culture. The didactic work of this story of human enfleshment, of mortality quite literally laid out before us, is a form of memento mori calling not to our terror of death but rather the tenderness of this embrace of bodily caregiving and care receiving. This sacred duet honors human mortality by presenting life and death as entanglements between and among humans. Our lives and our deaths are not solely our own but rather intimately entangled with others.

The story the *Pietà* presents is what we might call a cultural meme, reiterated in multiple variations from around the thirteenth century to our present moment. The perpetual presence of this scene of holding in the cultural imagination as an act of bodily care generates fresh versions that retell the story, reworking the characters, costumes, setting, and props for decades. But in every iteration, from every culture or time, the fundamental choreography of a caretaker holding the recipient of care remains the essence of the representation and the didactic core of these cultural representations. Each representation gains numinal resonance from its resemblance to the familiar icon of Michelangelo's and other *Pietàs*. These new iterations of the *Pietà* offer viewers a new meaning, a lesson to be read, through the allusion to the Christian *Pietà* so familiar in the received cultural imagination.

I offer here four contemporary *Pietàs* whose didactic work honors the human entanglements of care work. Although each of these *Pietàs* departs from this specific

Christian reference of the iconic *Pietàs*, they carry with them the cultural authority and the rich legacy of the Christian narrative of birth, life, death, and resurrection. The meaning-making work of *Pietàs* is to instruct their viewers in lessons about human mortality and our responsibility to care for human bodies and for one another at all stages of human life. The distinctive choreography of holding, the pose of the two entangled bodies, affirms this fundamental obligation of human attachment that enfleshment and mortality require of us.

The first *Pietà* I offer is a black-and-white photograph from 1990 of David Kirby on his deathbed, surrounded by family (link 2). This photograph carried out the didactic work of journalism in bringing awareness of the AIDS crisis to the American public. The realism of photography here adds truth value to the wrenching apart of human relationships that mortality brings. As in the duet of mother and child in Michelangelo's iconic *Pietà*, we witness the holding so fundamental to the human emotional attachment of familial love. However, the characters, setting, medium, and arrangement differ from the classic *Pietà*. The grainy black-and-white photograph suits the somber scene of senseless death that AIDS wrought on a community and a generation. The apparent hospital setting suggests the ascendance of medicine as both the explanatory template for human life characteristic of modernity, but also the withdrawal of redemption as a consolation for human suffering. Here, we witness raw grief and helplessness with no suggestion of consolation as the father holds his dying son while the mother holds her mourning daughter. Despite the despair of this AIDS *Pietà*, soft allusion to the redemptive sacred embrace of the traditional *Pietà* inflects the choreography of this scene of bodily care and attachment.

The second reiterative image of the familiar pose of the *Pietà* is the realistic sculptural representation by the Australian artist Sam Jinks (2007, link 3). This *Pietà* does its meaning-making work through a much closer allusion to the classic *Pietà*, inviting a focused didactic reading by substituting an ordinary twenty-first-century man contemplating a very old genderless figure cradled in his lap who we might read as the parent rather than the child of the caretaker figure. This arresting gender and age reversal of the traditional *Pietà*'s mother and child challenges the traditional obligation of women as caregivers for all humanity. The impassive and faintly perplexed expression on the man's face as well as his everyman demeanor, comments perhaps on the depletion of emotional attachment that masculine individualism has enforced upon many contemporary men.

The third *Pietà* also closely follows the bodily choreography of the Christian *Pietà* of lamenting mother and dead child, vividly bringing that scene to the violence of racism in America (link 4). In Tylonn Sawyer's 2018 American Gods series, we witness the *Pietà* as a choreography of protest rather than consolation. Here, a Black mother holds a dead Black boy in the characteristic hooded sweatshirt of Black American youth so vulnerable to violence. The American flag in the background both moves the scene of lament from the local to the national and witnesses the betrayal of promised equality Black people have endured. This *Pietà* of racial injustice re-choreographs the modestly lowered eyes of the traditional Christian Madonna into the fierce gaze of this mother as she glares with fierce accusation straight out at the witnesses, suggesting sorrow laced with rage at the layered wrongs this choreography recounts.

The final image I offer re-choreographs and recasts the *Pietà*'s iconic scene of human mortality in which the living behold the dead. In Robert Andy Coombs' (2019) color photograph "Cuddle on Couch" from the series Cripfag (link 5), we witness instead a tender reclining embrace between two nude men on a tattered sofa, each a living lover, one black and one white, one patient and one caregiver. The pose alludes not just to the classic *Pietà* but the sexualized repose of Manet's (mayonnaise) Olympia. The conventional erotica of this pose gives way as the unexpected juxtaposition of Coomb's G-tube protruding from his fleshly abdomen in this domestic scene overtakes our attention from the becalmed and modest penis, creating a visual dissonance that opens the opportunity for new meanings. This *Pietà* queers the traditional sacred dyad of bodily care between mother and child by rearranging the embrace and recasting maternal attachment as queer filial attachment. This domestic *Pietà* introduces the medicalized body as a subject of care, a merger of erotic and clinical attachment. This story of queer disabled domesticity renarrates what we have learned to think of as medical equipment and sexual attachment, inviting us to witness anew the human condition of fleshly finitude.

REPAIRING MISFITS

Mortality is the fundamental misfit of the human condition. Our urge to live is the essence of our bodily vitality, and our knowledge that we will die haunts that very vitality. The juxtaposition of these epistemological and phenomenological facts is the square peg in the round hole of human existence. Not only do we all die, but we know that we ourselves and everyone we care about will die, and we know that we must witness many of those deaths as well as our own. We also know that flesh is evanescent while world endures. Consequently, flesh emplaced in world is a relationship of misfitting. The *Pietà*'s sacred choreography might then be understood as both a witnessing of mortality as misfit and at the same time a repair of that misfit in the form of the fitting between two bodies that we witness in *Pietà* scene of holding.

These sacred choreographies of caregiving witness human mortality but at the same time offer us a narrative suggesting that attentive human care might ameliorate the sundering of relationships mortality insists upon. They answer Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's call for generative and generous rather than negative, or paranoid, narratives to counter what Paul Ricoeur calls "the hermeneutics of suspicion" (Sedgwick 2003, 4). The emblematic act of embrace can be seen as what Sedgwick terms a reparative narrative. The metaphor of repair here suggests a stitching up of the world that gestures toward women's traditional handicrafts and the principles of cultural feminism and care ethics that recuperate and revalue the work of women that patriarchy has denigrated.

The imagistic duets of these *Pietàs* advance a Sedgwickian narrative that works toward repairing through mutually attentive caregiving and caretaking the necessarily broken world that human limitation and fragility bequeathed to us through our lived, embodied existence. Such a narrative of human embodiment these *Pietà*'s offer overtakes the representation of sorrow and lamentation that such scenes of mortality depict.

In *Rethinking Repair*, Stephen J. Jackson lays out "broken world thinking" (2014, 221). The proper response to a broken world, Jackson suggests, is repair, what he defines as

> the subtle acts of care by which order and meaning in complex sociotechnical systems are maintained and transformed, human value is preserved and extended, and the complicated world of fitting into the varied circumstances of organizations, systems, and lives is accomplished. (222)

The entangled embrace of the *Pietàs* suggests, then, that the relationship of misfitting that is human mortality might be repaired, perhaps rehabilitated, through attentive care work between and among human bodies. What is repaired is not the body itself but the relational connections amongst mortal humans. The care work the *Pietà* depicts is not a cure but rather a mutual stewardship of one another that the embrace of holding emblematizes (Piepzna-Samarasinha and Lakshmi 2018). If misfits are the manifestation of a broken world, the human relational gesture of holding might then be an act of repair, a transformation of misfitting into an altogether human fit.

The didactic work of these *Pietàs* is to elevate care as sustaining attentiveness that repairs bodies in the sense of abiding with mortal flesh. This attitude stands in contradistinction to the traditional aims of allopathic medicine but conforms more to the philosophy and practice of palliative care. These images both honor and call upon an ethics of care that asserts that there is moral significance in the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life. The bioethicist Jackie Leach Scully (2008) and the philosopher Eva Feder Kittay (1999), among many others, define care work as maintaining the world of, and meeting the needs of, ourselves and others. Care ethics asserts moreover that dependency relations can and should guide public policy about human equality. The care work of maintaining human life, making families, dying, illness, disability, and death has been the work of women across all patriarchal societies throughout recorded human history.

HOLDING AS REPARATIVE AFFIRMATION

I'll gesture briefly in conclusion to these winding speculations about what misfitting makes by drawing from the twentieth-century philosopher Hannah Arendt's (1958) ambitious meditation on the human condition, which she offers her fellow humans on the heels of the massive devastation of World War II and the accompanying Holocaust that humanity had devolved toward at the optimistic pinnacle of modernity. In finding humanity's desperately needed universal commonality upon which to forge the notion of shared experience and thus solidarity, Arendt gathers together the human community based on the common condition of our natality rather than our mortality. Arendt suggests that the primary human bond of birth rather than death might unite us in the work of living together in ethical relations with one another and building human communities. Human action begins in shared natality and emerges through shared plurality in a perpetual context of uncertainty.

This human solidarity amid diversity grounded in the shared experience of being born is crucial, Arendt maintains, for us to address "the frailty of human affairs" with practices such as forgiveness and promising and to counter the contingency and hostility of the shared world into which each of us is born (1958, 188).

The diverse *Pietàs* presented here can be taken as didactic narratives representing the promise of natality—understood in the broadest sense as abiding with and sustaining human embodiment—that Arendt finds to be the essence of the human condition. The reading of the *Pietà* here offers a choreography of holding that witnesses and sacralizes our embodied relations of caregiving and caretaking at both the beginning and ending of life. The *Pietà*'s reparative narrative of natality attending to mortality is modest rather than triumphant in its aspirations and generative in its varied iterations that have extended and reinterpreted its meanings across the centuries.

Finally, Arendt (1996) offers us an exhortation in her early work that we might imagine as the call that the holding figure extends to the reclining figure of care embraced in the *Pietàs*. The gesture of support and affirmation that the *Pietà*'s choreography of holding expresses is Arendt's ethical invocation that humans might offer one another, the restrained yet revivifying call: "I want you to be" (Latin: *volo ut sis*) (301). Arendt's active sentence is a beckoning into life, the human condition that Arendt concludes is the highest good. This invocation to life, to *be*, both witnesses and responds to our inherent vulnerability, frailty, and need for others. As the theologian Inger Marie Lid suggests, Arendt's refrain calling one's fellow human to *be* revivifies the human bond through affirming shared natality and prompting action (2022, 102). This summon to *be* is to both have life and to act from the distinctiveness of one's individual being. Imaginatively supplementing the *Pietà*'s visual narrative with the beckoning call to life of "I want you to be" strengthens the didactic work proposed here that the choreography of care the *Pietà* bestows on its centuries of witnesses.

What are you to draw from the concatenation of misfits I've offered here? I intend these scenes of misfitting and the accompanying images to suggest that misfits between bodies and world, especially bodies considered disabled, which of course will eventually include all of our bodies, can generate fresh meanings and renewed understandings. The first part of my essay offers a misfit romance to show how we might cobble coherence from what might first seem incoherent, similarly to the way disabled body-minds may seem incoherent to the normals but once recognized have an integrity and wholeness of their own. The middle, briefer, part of the essay suggests that in contrast to the technology that produces my misfit romance, the rapidly developing gene editing technologies that aim to normalize us all would reduce the number of people who generate distinctive gains or benefits to persons and worlds. The concluding part of my essay universalizes what we think of as disability by casting what we take to be the exception into the universal condition of human mortality. The final meaning making images of these *Pietàs* invoke not only mortality but, perhaps more significantly, they suggest natality as the shared common human condition of simply being born, of emerging from one human body into the collective arms of the human community. Presenting the *Pietàs* through Arendt's natality offers a model of being with and understanding one another in an attitude of care and love that might perhaps mitigate the awkward asymmetries of misfitting by opening

up the recognition that we are all misfits, that this fundamental misfit between flesh and world is the human condition shared by all. The repair that misfitting calls for is attentive care and love, an attitude of welcome and openness to all body-minds, whether expected or unexpected, whether fit or misfit.

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