

ANNA HICKEY-MOODY

un-containable affects:

disability and the edge of aesthetics

ATO QUAYSON

*Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis
of Representation*

Columbia University Press, New York, 2007

ISBN 9780231139038 (pb) 9780231139021 (hb)

RRP US\$12.75 (pb) US\$72.00 (hb)

This is a book about bodies and the ethics of corporeality as much as it is about literature. Quayson states that 'it is the body itself in its naked corporeality that is at the heart of social and political nervousness in real life' (204). This focus on lived experience and everyday politics is articulated through the concept of 'aesthetic nervousness', which is developed and applied in various forms across the book. The concept explores what happens when a literary character's disability exceeds dominant systems of making meaning. Specifically: 'Aesthetic nervousness is seen when the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability.' (15) Aesthetic nervousness is what happens when the meaning created by disabled bodies exceeds dominant aesthetic and signifying systems. It may begin as an interaction between a 'disabled' and a 'non-disabled' body, but it extends to change (or contest) dominant systems of meaning making and aesthetics. Quayson explains:

disability joins the sublime as marking the constitutive points of aesthetic representation. Aesthetic nervousness is what ensues and can be discerned in the suspension, collapse, or general short-circuiting of the hitherto dominant protocols of representation that may have governed the text. (26)

Quayson considers literary works in relation to a taxonomy of nine ways in which, he argues, aesthetic nervousness occurs or is created by the authors he studies. These are: disability as null set (empty vessel) and/or moral test; dis-

ability as the interface with otherness; disability as articulation of disjuncture between thematic and narrative vectors; disability as moral deficit/evil; disability as epiphany; disability as a signifier of ritual insight; disability as inarticulable and enigmatic tragic insight; disability as hermeneutical impasse; and disability as normality.¹ (52) These categories are developed through analyses of writings by Samuel Beckett (*Molloy* and *Endgame*), Toni Morrison (*Paradise*, *Sula* and *Beloved*), Wole Soyinka (*The Strong Breed* and *Madmen and Specialists*) and J. M. Coetzee (*The Life and Times of Michael K*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Disgrace* and *Slow Man*), and through a particular historical analysis of Robben Island (where Mandela and others were imprisoned). Through his analysis of characters drawn from this selection of works, Quayson advances, with attention to detail, his concept of *aesthetic nervousness*.

The nine forms of aesthetic nervousness detailed by Quayson provide the focal points for his respective chapters on the featured authors. These quite specific articulations of aesthetic nervousness are explored with attention to detail not possible to emulate in a review. Here, I will gesture towards some ways in which Quayson employs his own categories of aesthetic nervousness in his reading of literature, and in so doing, I briefly add a commentary of my own.

The work of Beckett is read largely in relation to the category of 'disability as hermeneutical impasse'. (58) But Quayson also suggests that 'pain has an elusive and problematic status' (58) in Beckett's work and that aesthetic nervousness is created in relation to physical

and mental impairment and the absenting of pain. Morrison's work is considered as examples of "disability as epiphany", 'disability as enigmatic tragic insight', and 'disability as normality'. (114) Soyinka's work articulates aesthetic nervousness in relation to 'disability as moral deficit/evil' (144) and the systemic uncanny. Quayson explains this through stating:

It is the conversion of the sense of a systemic disorder into a negative affect that marks what I describe as the systemic uncanny. In the face of persistent physical and social violence, either triggered by acute political chaos or the general collapse of social order, a process of internalisation of these perceived disorders takes place. (142)

This systemic uncanny is also, in part, an individual and systemic somatisation of the disorder generated by disability. To my mind, this notion speaks to disability as a signifier of ritual insight and disability as hermeneutical impasse, yet it also exceeds these categorisations. While Quayson focuses on the ways the systemic uncanny works in Soyinka's writings, and 'disability as moral deficit/evil' (144) in Soyinka's texts, we can also read the above-mentioned categories of aesthetic nervousness into his discussion. Quayson then moves on to argue that Coetzee's texts, specifically *The Life and Times of Michael K*, generate aesthetic nervousness through employing disability as the interface with otherness, and disability as hermeneutical impasse (silence). Here, Quayson seems to soften his previously fairly rigid categories of analysis, stating:

My argument here is that the autistic's silence must be taken as having an effect on the entire domain of the narrative discourse while also being produced and sustained by it. (155)

In other words, Quayson argues that Michael K's silence affects meaning across the text in ways that extend beyond Michael's actions. Michael's silence also affects the characterisation of others throughout the text. Here Quayson is suggesting that the effects of Michael K's silence cannot be confined to a consideration of Michael's actions alone. His silence impacts on the actions of all other characters in the novel. While this is a valid and interesting point, for me, Quayson's discussion of autism was limited in uncomfortable ways through his adherence to broad, medical categorisations of 'autistic behaviour'. Page 152 of the book features a list comprised of twelve dot points that map the characteristics and behaviours of people with high-functioning autism. This list then serves as the framework for conceptualising the character of Michael K. I feel that this reliance on medical and behaviourist models of knowledge limits rather than extends the ways in which we, as readers, might come to know the character of Michael.

I am only gesturing towards the lines of analytic approach taken in each of the chapters. I hope to offer you a sense of the ways in which Quayson sets up the work on aesthetic nervousness in its nine articulations, yet such an impression will be partial. I am choosing to focus on the larger, socio-political issues that lie at the heart of Quayson's project, rather than

dwelling on his nine forms of aesthetic nervousness. This is because these forms, in all their specificity, are the vehicle or endpoint for a project essentially concerned with ethics and embodied difference. Quayson states:

Disability serves to close the gap between representation and ethics, making visible the aesthetic field's relationship to the social situation of persons with a disability in the real world. (24)

So, in some respects Quayson is mining literature for clues to how disabled bodies might effect social change. He finds these moments at points in which the affects attached to, and produced by, disabled bodies rupture a dominant discursive paradigm. Most often, such bodies articulate beyond a given aesthetic system. Quayson is instructive:

The primary level in which [aesthetic nervousness] may be discerned is in the interaction between a disabled and non-disabled character, where a variety of tensions may be identified. However, in most texts, aesthetic nervousness is hardly ever limited to this primary level, but is augmented by tensions refracted across other levels of the text such as the disposition of symbols and motifs, the overall narrative or dramatic perspective and reversals of plot structure, and so on. (15)

Aesthetic nervousness is a term for the ways in which interaction between 'disabled' and 'non-disabled' characters change systems of

understanding within and outside literary texts. Quayson then opens out his categories of aesthetic nervousness to interface with the social, stating:

The final dimension of aesthetic nervousness is that between the reader and the text. The reader's status within a given text is a function of the several interacting elements such as the identification with the vicissitudes of the life of a particular character, or the alignment between the reader and the shifting positions of the narrator, or the necessary reformulations of the reader's perspective enjoined by the modulations of various plot elements and so on. (15)

The reader is thus very much included in the 'circuit' of communication that aesthetic nervousness breaks and re-wires. Quayson's choice to undertake an analysis of plays and novels together is an interesting one, and certainly gives one a sense that the texts he considers are about living, breathing bodies and the politics of embodying disability and race. To a certain extent, the playscripts put flesh on the bones of his literary analysis and this foregrounding of corporeality is intentional. Aspects of Quayson's analysis adopt qualitatively different components as he moves from considering literature to plays, and he states: 'The choice of the plays of Beckett and Soyinka allows a certain salience to the idea of the (sceptical) interlocutor, since as dramatic texts they incorporate dialogue as an explicit feature of dialogism.' (29)

The task of reading the social through aesthetic nervousness begins to come into its own in the chapter on Robben Island, which is titled 'The Repeating Island'. Quayson clearly presents aesthetic nervousness as a challenge intended to inspire readers to 'lift our eyes from the reading of literature to attend more closely to the implications of the social universe around us' (31). This connection with the 'universe around us' becomes the focus of 'The Repeating Island', which is a historical geographic consideration of disability, race and difference on Robben Island. This chapter brought to life the politics of aesthetic nervousness and transported me to a place of struggle and contestation generated over disability. The previous chapters hadn't offered as much of a sense of possibility, and I think this foreclosure of hope is exactly Quayson's point. It reflects the ways writers employ characters with disabilities: mainly as agents of unrest, their bodies and subjectivities are sites of disturbance for the reader and the narrative. Indeed, at points in the chapter on Beckett, in need of reprieve, I fantasised that the ethically null 'Forrest Gump' approach to characterising disability offered a desirable alternative:

Let me say this: bein' a idiot is no box of chocolates. People laugh, lose patience, treat you shabby. Now they says folks 'sposed to be kind to the afflicted, but let me tell you—it ain't always that way. Even so, I got no complaints, cause I reckon I done live a pretty interestin' life, so to speak.²

Forrest's naive amicability, for all the pathos and condescension implicit in its characterisation, was a welcome imagined relief from the agonising existences of Nagg, Nell, Hamm and Clov. Elements of Quayson's discussion of Michael K, the autistic protagonist in Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K*, come close to articulating the content dissonance that can be such a fabulous and inspiring aspect of people with disabilities and which is captured in the short quote above from the childlike but resolute and shameless Forrest. Quayson's treatment of the Repeating Island doesn't gesture towards hope through unpacking the brave, resolute and shameless characteristics of disability, but it does map social change that has been effected through political struggle. It is this aspect of the chapter that gave me hope. However, I did feel like a genuine acknowledgment of the positive aspects of disability could have been strengthened at times.

What appeals to me most about the book are the ways in which Quayson has conceptualised aesthetic nervousness in relation to its potential to be taken up outside the literary domain. One of the exciting things about Quayson's work is that he reads literature with an eye to the real world. Quayson certainly avoids any solipsism and indeed offers strategies for reading the political in the literary. Indeed, at times, passages from *Aesthetic Nervousness* read like a call to arms.

Quayson is clearly advancing the fields of postcolonial literature studies and disability studies with this thoughtful and considered analysis. A passage from his conclusion, articulates, in part, the work he hopes *Aesthetic*

Nervousness will perform within academic research. He states:

Abstractions may be necessary to school our moral sense, but in the final instance it is the nature of the social world we imagine and work for that validates our ethical dispositions. (210)

In *Aesthetic Nervousness* Quayson looks to rework imaginings of the social world as played out in literature and as performed in the day-to-day lives of many kinds of bodies. It's a huge project and one I will be thinking about and further unpacking for years to come.

ANNA HICKEY-MOODY is a lecturer in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. She is interested in how we can re-frame questions of social justice, and as such, her research intersects across cultural studies of youth, disability and gender.

-
1. In using the term 'null set', Quayson references the work of Martha Stoddard Holmes. Specifically, he states: 'The first and perhaps most obvious literary representation of disability is that in which it acts as some form of ethical background to the actions of other characters, or as a means of testing or enhancing their moral standing. Martha Stoddard Holmes (2002, 228) refers to this kind of representation as "critical null sets, convenient containers or the essential human emotions required by the non-disabled characters around them".' (Quayson, p. 36). See Martha Stoddard Holmes, 'The Twin Structure: Disabled Women in Victorian Courtship Plots' in S. Snyder (ed.), *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, New York, MLA, 2002, pp. 222–33.
 2. Winston Groom, *Forrest Gump*, Black Swan Press, London, 1986, p. 1.