

FITS AND MISFITS: RETHINKING DISABILITY, DEBILITY, AND WORLD WITH MERLEAU-PONTY

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Much of Merleau-Ponty's thought centers around the idea that we find ourselves neither separate from the world, nor "in" it, but fully intertwined, caught up in a web of relations that shape experience through and through, bottom to top. Those relations are charged, which is to say, human experience is conducted through a *web of forces* in which we ever find ourselves "fitting" or "misfitting" relative to a given set and setting. We deploy the concept of "misfit" here to explicitly invoke Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's (2010) seminal article, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept." Fits and misfits, in Garland-Thomson's sense, are everywhere once you know how to look for them: spatial, placial, architectural, equipmental, technological, economic, social, cultural, cosmic, and so on. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty and for Garland-Thomson, one could say that being human is a navigation project. Indeed, each and every one of our lives *just is* its project of journeying through the channels, paths, and alleyways that existence lays out before us.

Yet, in our highly modified world, fitting or misfitting is rarely a question of chance. More often than not, we encounter barriers or affordances due to things that have been built—materially, but also socio-culturally through sedimented norms, practices, institutions, and habits. What's more, given rampant inequity and injustice, many are actively *made* to misfit. One form of forced misfitting is described by Jasbir Puar (2017) as *debility*. For Puar, debility refers to the *making impaired* of individuals and groups through systemic harms, whether these be a result of police brutality, capitalist modes of production that immiserate workers, policies that bar many from accessing healthcare, housing, and employment, and so on. The concept "addresses injury and bodily exclusion that are endemic rather than epidemic or exceptional" (xvii).¹ Debility, on our view, helpfully names the many ways in which people are *made* to misfit. Debility is a crucial concept for critical phenomenologies of disability, which we understand as a method engaged in the "historically-grounded, quasi-transcendental study of particular lifeworlds" as well as in "(situated and interested) analysis

¹ See also Puar (2017, 13, 73).

of power” (Guenther 2021, 5). One can understand neither the meaning of disability, nor the complexity of fitting and misfitting, without appreciation of how affordances are allocated by means of power.

Merleau-Ponty’s observation in the “Freedom” chapter of the *Phenomenology of Perception* that “insofar as I have hands, feet, a body, and a world, I sustain intentions around myself that are not decided upon and that affect my surroundings in ways I do not choose” is all the more poignant when we understand it through the power relations that define experiences of (mis)fitting, (dis)ability, and debility (2012, 465). And yet, when we are forced to acknowledge that the world we live in is shot through with injustices, many of them deliberately inflicted upon innocent people, we must also contend with the fact that we often have more agency to address and remedy them than we might at first suppose. The articles in this special issue have been organized into four sections, each of which addresses different dimensions of misfitting, disability, and/or debility that are experienced in communicating with others (section one), caring for extremely ill loved ones (section two), adjusting or failing to adjust to temporal norms (section three), and responding creatively to the complex fabric of aesthetic and political life (section four).

Section one, *Challenging Communicative Norms*, fittingly begins (pun intended!) with Garland-Thomson’s contribution entitled: “What Misfitting Makes.” This article explores surprisingly generative (and sometimes comical) misfits (such as “Miss Fitz” or “Miss Fritz” for “misfits” and “Norm Mates” for “normates,” both the result of dictation software technology) that Garland-Thomson argues are capable of producing “disability gains” insofar as they “hold the potential for new meanings” (6). Drawing upon the powerful iconography of Michelangelo’s *Pietà* and its creative reinterpretations by contemporary artists, Garland-Thomson argues that the *Pietà* highlights “the fundamental misfit all humans share,” namely, the mortality of our flesh in a world that continues on without us (14). Susan Bredlau’s “Conversational Accessibility: Healthcare, Community, and the Ethics of Everyday Encounters” offers a critical phenomenological analysis of the communicative challenges that emerge in and through the interactions between patients and healthcare workers in the clinical context. Bredlau’s emphasis upon “conversational accessibility” calls attention to one of the most pervasive, yet at the same time under-theorized forms, that a lack of accessibility can take. Indeed, “how healthcare workers speak with patients—or even if healthcare workers speak with patients,” as Bredlau points out, “has a bearing on whether healthcare workers fulfill their responsibility to patients” (24). She concludes with a discussion of three strategies that have proven effective in improving conversational accessibility in a healthcare context: trauma-informed care, a narrative ethics approach, and a commitment to community-based participatory research.

Section two, *The Interworld of Intensive Caring*, explores how fit and misfit emerge in caretaking relations—or, in a different register, through what Eva Feder Kittay (1999) has called “dependency work”—and how such relations are shot through with both unique difficulties and also profound beauty. In “Being Touched by Wellness: Merleau-Ponty, Nancy, and the Intensive Care Unit,” Helen Fielding explores the rich, intimate contact that can occur in the Intensive Care Unit *despite* the cold, disconnected logic by which such a space operates. Drawing on her experience with her sister, Bronzino’s 1560 painting of

Noli me Tangere, and the work of Jean-Luc Nancy as well as Merleau-Ponty, she explores the meaning of wellness in light of our finitude and the role of both love and joy therein. Ann Murphy’s “The Spirited Interworld: Caregiving and the Liminal Phenomenology of Dementia” provides a moving account of her experience caregiving for her mother with advanced Parkinsonian dementia. Pushing against the clinical norm to “play along” with the hallucinatory landscape of such dementia, Murphy explores the ethics of dementia caregiving instead as “being-with,” a practice we desperately need to cultivate collectively.

Against the Clock: Misfitting and Time names section three of this special issue. David Morris analyzes time’s “normality” as well as the dynamic relationship between norms and time in “An-Archic Time: Melting the Clock as Hypernorm of the I Can—and Philosophy.” He argues that time is not transcendental, but quasi-transcendental, arising out of what he calls *deep change*. Crippling the clock, Morris draws out the cosmological implications of our relationship to one of the most basic ways we fit and misfit: seconds, minutes, hours, days, and years. Rachel Elliott’s “Sharing Time with Misfits: We-Experience Across Bodily Difference” takes up the question of sharing time between normates and misfits, between those who fit and those who don’t. She argues that it is shared body schemes, understood as emergent, bi-directional, and flexible, that provide the ground for a “we” even across otherwise significant differences.

In section four, *Who is a Misfit? On Aesthetic Creativity and Political Vulnerability*, Rebecca Longtin’s article, “Merleau-Ponty’s Cézanne As Misfit Artist,” exposes the false dilemma of viewing Paul Cézanne’s mental illness as either the source of his creativity or an obstacle to it that he needed to overcome. In her words:

[T]rying to ascribe a simple causal connection between Cézanne’s embodied particularities and his works of art is reductive and deflates the meaning we might find in them. Yet these embodied particularities are still significant for understanding the meaning of Cézanne’s art. It is not an either/or problem. (101)

Longtin argues that Cézanne’s work exhibits what she terms a “misfit optics” that is truer to our lived perspective than Cartesian optics, which privileges an ideal linear perspective, or a “God’s eye view,” that ultimately inhibits and restricts artistic creativity (102). In “The Politics of Vulnerability and the School for Peace: Insights from Butler, Merleau-Ponty, and Family Systems Theory,” Laura McMahan offers a critical phenomenology of human vulnerability, not as a trait we individually possess, but as an intercorporeal relation between two (or more) entities whose actions directly affect one another, as we see when one person, group, or nation’s attempts to eschew their own vulnerability produces increased vulnerability for others. McMahan draws upon family systems theory as well as Butler’s critical phenomenology to address the ethical, political, and intercorporeal implications of the heightened forms of vulnerability that have been produced since the 1948 founding of the state of Israel, including, most recently, the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack and its aftermath, Israel’s military assault on Gaza. By acknowledging “the empirical, systematic ways in which our vulnerabilities are intertwined one with the other in multigenerational, complementary, and cyclical manners that are always framed by

competing group narratives,” McMahon suggests, we can overcome the psychological rigidity of presuming that our own narrative is the only legitimate one, a perspective that inevitably does serious injustice to others (136).

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