

A Body, Undone

LIVING ON AFTER GREAT PAIN

[A MEMOIR]

CHRISTINA CROSBY

208 pages | Paper | 978-1-4798-5316-8
American Studies | Disability Studies | LGBT Studies |
Gender & Women's Studies
Part of the *Sexual Cultures* series

A Body, Undone

Living On After Great Pain

Instructor's Guide

In the early evening on October 1, 2003, Christina Crosby was three miles into a seventeen mile bicycle ride, intent on making 1,000 miles for the riding season. She was a respected senior professor of English who had celebrated her fiftieth birthday a month before. As she crested a hill, she caught a branch in the spokes of her bicycle, which instantly pitched her to the pavement. Her chin took the full force of the blow, and her head snapped back. In that instant, she was paralyzed.

In *A Body, Undone*, Crosby puts into words a broken body that seems beyond the reach of language and understanding. She writes about a body shot through with neurological pain, disoriented in time and space, incapacitated by paralysis and deadened sensation. To address this foreign body, she calls upon the readerly pleasures of narrative, critical feminist and queer thinking, and the concentrated language of lyric poetry. Working with these resources, she recalls her 1950s tomboy ways in small-town, rural Pennsylvania, and records growing into the 1970s through radical feminism and the affirmations of gay liberation.

Deeply unsentimental, Crosby communicates in unflinching prose the experience of “diving into the wreck” of her body to acknowledge grief, and loss, but also to recognize the beauty, fragility, and dependencies of all human bodies. A memoir that is a meditation on disability, metaphor, gender, sex, and love, *A Body, Undone* is a compelling account of living on, as Crosby rebuilds her body and fashions a life through writing, memory, and desire.

INTRODUCTION

I have written this guide to open up *A Body, Undone* to a number of different approaches, offering you my own understanding of both some of the theoretical questions it engages, and a range of topics that emerge over the course of the book. I am a literary critic and lover of literature, and also have a lively and long-standing interest in both feminist and queer studies. Most recently, both feminist and queer theories were invaluable in helping me frame critical ways to engage the life that I now lead and the body that I now am. Though I turned to disability studies only after I began living with a spinal cord injury, I quickly understood how radically the knowledge of that field challenges dominant understandings of disability as an individual affliction to be pitied, and, if possible, cured. Disability studies is a bracing and necessary critique of the advantages automatically, unthinkingly, and all very “naturally” accorded to the able-bodied. I believe that my book can be taught in a range of courses, and reach students through its straightforward discussion of how I now live.

In *a Body, Undone*, I depend upon literature in my search to find the words to represent my life. The many books of literature, criticism, and critical theory lining the bookshelves of my study provided me with tools and insights to think about what had become of me, and what I could make of myself. The cycling accident resulted in what is called a “catastrophic injury.” That’s a specific medical and legal term referring in my case to injuries to my central nervous system – damage created by the fracturing of my fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae that scraped my spinal cord.

My brother, who was my only sibling, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in his late twenties, and lived only into his fifties. Damage to his central nervous system had, by the end, paralyzed him almost completely. We had competed together endlessly in sport and play when we were children, and when a child I sometimes thought of himself as my twin. In my early adolescence, I felt gender to be the first imposition of unbridgeable difference between us, a difference only increased by the multiple sclerosis that shaped his bodymind from his late twenties on. (“Bodymind” is a neologism taken up by some phenomenological philosophers as a way to describe the inseparability of mind from body)

The shock of finding myself with significance paralysis of all four limbs was intense, as I had watched my brother's decline, and had some understanding of what this meant for me. As I write, in our adulthood, for three decades I had been the one who continued able-bodied, so that "[t]he contrast in our lives could hardly have been more complete—he was seriously disabled and I was not. In an instant, at the symbolic age of fifty, that contrast collapsed and my childhood fantasy of being his twin seemed malevolently realized, for there we were, each with seriously incapacitating damage to the central nervous system, each in a wheelchair, each requiring intensive assistance just to make it through each day. My brother/myself" (20).

I broke my neck when I was fifty. He died when he was fifty-seven. Our lives were different from the first, of course, because he was his own person, and I was mine. Yet the event of my paralysis once again intimately intertwined us in my imagination. The shock of his death, which followed close upon my mother's, intensified the current of grief already running deep and strong within me, and brought me to begin writing slowly cohered as *A Body, Undone: Living on after Great Pain*.

Even with this grief, I live on, as my subtitle insists, and though grief remains interminable, I have a happy life with my lover, Janet, my work and my friends. My brother remained engaged with the world, and drew people to him through his interest in their lives. Living on is what the book is all about. I've had to rethink everything about my life, from how to hold a toothbrush, to how I could do my work. . I wrote out of necessity to clarify the complexities of my life. "How else will I understand? How will you?" (21).

INTRODUCTION

I have been interested in critical theories for my whole working life, starting when I entered graduate school in 1975 with the idea of becoming a feminist literary critic. When I was confronted with an unintelligible body and devastated mind, those twenty-eight years of reading, thinking, teaching, and writing helped me understand the new and disorienting experiences of my life, and they provide a conceptual framework for *A Body, Undone*.

I've taught courses in feminist theories since the mid-1980s, and have read and taught books from queer studies for many years. To these I have now added critical theories of disability. I tell my students that *reading and understanding theory helps you to ask good questions*. Only when you bring critical attention to the conditions of intelligibility (how you know what you know), can you think new thoughts. Otherwise, you are reliant on received ideas that you would have no way of recognizing as concepts with theoretical force. Thinking critically about the current order of things – as feminist, queer, and disability theories do – allows you to think in new ways and engage the world differently.

A few of those books and articles are listed below, with brief explanations of how I think they mattered to me as I wrote the book or as I thought about it after it was done. You could choose among them to teach in any number of ways.

DISABILITY STUDIES

A Body, Undone is indebted to disability studies, as I make clear in laying out a core principle of the field in “Your Puny Vulnerable Self,” the first chapter of the book.

Scholars have convincingly argued that disability is not a personal attribute of crippled bodies or minds, but a social phenomenon that bars the full participation in public life of persons so impaired. Impassable barriers and narrowly conceived measurements of ability make it hard to acknowledge and address nonnormative bodyminds. We are conveniently invisible because we are all too often immured in private spaces. Disability is created by building codes and education policy, subway elevators that don't work and school buses that don't arrive, and all the marginalization, exploitation, demeaning acts, and active exclusions that deny full access and equality to “the disabled” (7).

This “social model” of disability is conceptually powerful, both necessary and true. Understanding disability in these terms motivated the activists who dumped themselves out of their wheelchairs to slowly crawl up the steps of the United States Capital, one of many actions that over a decade of struggle finally persuaded

Congress to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act. Its provisions “[prohibit] discrimination against people with disabilities in several areas, including employment, transportation, public accommodations, communications and access to state and local government’ programs and services” (United States Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/disability/ada>)

The intellectual field of disability studies owes much to this understanding, as I quickly discovered. Considering disability as a social phenomenon rather than an individual affliction changes everything. Yet the impairments that create disability are mental and physical conditions that can cause great suffering. When we rely on the social model, it’s unsurprising that we would think in terms of social inequities and the social norms that naturalize injustice. Immuring disabled people in institutions and dismissing kids to “special ed” make disability easy to mock, on the one hand, and pity on the other. Conditions like these are both painful and enraging, and must be addressed socially and fought politically, but I think we need to widen the scope of our inquiry to include accounts of suffering from a genetic condition, or an ill or damaged bodymind. *A Body, Undone* is an extended exploration of physical and emotional pain that may seem to contravene a founding assumption of disability studies, but I am not alone in my explorations.

Alison Kafer, “Un/Safe Disclosures: Scenes of Disability and Trauma,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, (2016), 10.1, 1-20

A leading scholar in the field, Alison Kafer is interested in opening the field to discussions of pain that do not pathologize disability, but recognize complexities that simply haven’t been addressed. She addresses pain and trauma through a consideration of “trigger warnings” that alert readers or listeners or viewers that a representation is coming up that could involuntarily and without warning summon up in them feelings associated with a trauma they have suffered. Kafer argues that such warnings address questions of access, allowing students, especially disabled students to enroll in her courses, knowing that she will be sensitive to the fact that some have suffered, as she did, in the events that impaired her body. Others born in non-normative bodies may have endured mockery or lived through repeated medical procedures. There are many ways to suffer as a disabled child. Kafer argues that the field of disability studies needs to address the unforgettable suffering that may come with disability, even if the disabled person goes on to live a vibrant and fulfilling life, as she herself has done.

Eli Claire, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Duke University Press, 2017)

Eli Claire's book is driven by a strong commitment to the analysis of social disablement and the existential dangers of living as disabled in social world that understands disability only as a deficit. The book is structured by his long grappling with the possibility of cure. He insistently and eloquently asks why people with atypical bodyminds should not regard themselves and others positively rather than negatively, even as he acknowledges that not all disabled people should think as he does – chronic pain, after all, might call out for medical relief. He argues that disability creates a way of living that affords new understandings of what it means to be a human being, and creates new ways of living together. He links the precariousness that can attend living with social disablement to the precariousness of ecosystems assaulted by destructive forces. In response, Claire reates a complex web of relations with other oppressed peoples, including the native peoples whose land was stolen and whose way of life continues under hostile occupation.

Sins Invalid: *an Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility*
(www.sinsinvalid.org)

The video, *Sins Invalid*, is about the queer, colored, and disabled actors who make up the theater troupe by that name, with revealing interviews, discussion of their practices, and scenes from their performance. As the title says, they refused to be shamed and instead make with their bodies and words a compelling and, life-affirming beauty

See also:

Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* (Winter 2015) 30. 1, 268-284

Alyson Patsavas, "Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain: Leaky Bodies, Connective Tissue, and Feeling Discourse," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, (2014) 8.2, 203-218

Disability Studies in *A Body Undone*

The complexities I summarize here are addressed explicitly and implicitly throughout my book. I discuss disability studies directly in chapter 1, "Your Puny, Vulnerable Self." Chapter 5, "Caring at the Cash Nexus," focuses on my arrangements for the help on which my life depends, and addresses the ways in which the caring labor that disabled people require is undervalued in the United States. Chapter 17, "The Horror! The Horror!" recounts my fear of aging in my already-compromised body, and complicates some the conclusions implied by the social model.

Discussion questions:

1. This book has an epigraph, a poem by Emily Dickinson titled “After Great Pain” (Dickinson left this poem untitled, so literary convention uses the first phrase of the first line in lieu of a title). Discuss how an epigraph functions and what you learn by carefully reading the three stanzas of this poem. Crosby silently quotes this poem in her own title, and she quotes lines from it in her book. How does the Dickinson poem matter to her? What do you learn about Crosby’s understanding of living with spinal cord injury?
2. Characterize the “social model,” and explain how it has been such an important concept to both scholars working in the field of disability studies, and activists advancing the rights of disabled people. In many ways, Eli Clare abides by its axioms, but his book is not unthinkingly aligned by them. Discuss the understanding of disability that he represents in his book, paying attention to its complexities.
3. Sins Invalid is an art-making collective that we see at work in the video documenting their process and its results. What do you make of the name of this group? How do they talk about their work? Why is it important? How do you think their understanding of disability relates to Eli Clare’s work? How to Crosby’s? What do you learn by reading and viewing together these representations of living with disability?

PHENOMENOLOGY

A philosophical tradition focused on the study of perception, phenomenology is a recurrent concern of the book that is especially noticeable whenever I describe my body and my profoundly changed sensorium. I refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, an important philosopher working in this tradition and quote from his work in in chapter 12, “I’m Your Physical Lover.” First I summarize:

In his study of “the phenomenology of perception,” Merleau-Ponty argues that for humans, being is “a perpetual incarnation.” You become who you are over the course of a life that unfolds as an ongoing interaction with objects and others, from the infant you once were, whose bodily cartography slowly emerged as you were handled by caregivers whose speech washed over you, to the grown-up you are today, drawn beyond reason to one person rather than another (125).

Vivian Sobchack, “Living a ‘Phantom Limb’: On the Phenomenology of Bodily Integrity,” *Body and Society*, (2010) 16.3, 51-67

Vivian Sobchack writes vividly and in great detail of the irrepressible sensation of a phantom limb following the loss of her left leg, and uses phenomenology as a way to describe, as carefully as possible, the feeling of a leg that doesn’t simply go away after it is amputated, but stays with her as a strange and compelling phantom. She shows that description of embodied life is never simple, and is bound to encounter elements or moments that seem to defy representation. Phenomenology, however, posits that such difficult descriptions are the best way to approach the complexities of living in/as/with a bodymind. Indeed, “bodymind” is a neologism that I learned through reading phenomenology, though Sobchack herself does not use the term

Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Duke University Press, 2005), “The Orient and Other Others,” 109-156

Sara Ahmed discusses the ways in which our bodies and minds are constituted through our relationships to objects and others, and moves from these basic phenomenological insights to a discussion of how we are oriented relationally and live with reference to one another. She then scales up these observations to track the geopolitical formations of the twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. She “queers” phenomenology by using its basic understandings for her analysis of how racism, sexism and homophobia are felt by both body and mind. An enveloping “social skin” contiguous to the skin of the body ensures that these forces are felt viscerally and immediately, smoothing the way for some and throwing up barriers for others.

Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality* (Columbia University Press, 2010), Part One, “What Is a Body?” 13-68

The first part of Gayle Salamon’s book *Assuming a Body* enlists both psychoanalysis and phenomenology as approaches to embodiment that can help us understand just what it means to “assume” a body, for you easily just assume that having a body is the substrate for our lives, yet you must also assume this body, take it up as “your own.” By joining together these approaches to subjectivity (how you become a speaking subject able to represent yourself using “I”), she introduces to the self-conscious observations of the phenomenologist the irrationalities of the unconscious that announces itself through dreams, and feelings, and patterns of behavior that simply won’t go away, even if we devoutly desire that they would.

Phenomenology in *A Body Undone* than does Salamon

Chapter 3, “Bewilderment,” describes my profound confusion when I regained consciousness in the hospital, and Chapter 4, “Falling into Hell” is an extended account of the profoundly disruptive neurological pain I then suffered, which remains insistent despite the pain meds on which I now depend. Chapter 6, “Lost in Space,” recalls a childhood of play, and then describes the proprioceptive confusion created by damage to my central nervous system. Indeed, all of the chapters try to describe how it feels to live as I do, and to acknowledge that body and mind are simultaneously distinct and inseparable.

Discussion questions:

1. How does Crosby characterize the neurological pain created by damage to her central nervous system? Be as specific as you can: what words? What metaphors? What are the overriding feelings you notice her describing as you read about the accident and its aftermath? What do you learn about pain from reading Crosby and Sobchack together?
2. Where does Crosby write about proprioception, and what is meant by the term? Why is it an important part of embodied life? How does it relate to disability?
3. Sobchack and Crosby both strive to represent as exactly as they can how their impaired bodies accommodated themselves or did not accommodate their changed conditions, in Crosby’s case living with an irreversible spinal cord injury, and in Sobchack’s accommodating herself to a prosthetic leg. Why is this exactitude important? Make sure you consider specific examples.
4. Sobchack is careful to distinguish her phantom limb from a phantom that might be characterized as unconscious. She thus distances herself from psychoanalysis, which is interested in what our conscious selves cannot know directly. Why is this important to her as a phenomenologist? Salamon reaches different conclusions about the usefulness of psychoanalysis to phenomenology than does Salamon. Characterize in as much detail as you can summon the differences between these two phenomenologists.
5. Ahmed advances the concept of a “social skin.” How does that skin relate to the organ that is the largest one on/in our bodies? How does Ahmed extend her phenomenological evaluation of skin into the domains of social and political life?

PSYCHOANALYSIS

Freudian psychoanalysis is the intellectual tradition that first theorized and continues to explore the unconscious dimensions of a person's life. How do we develop from the absolute dependency of infancy, through childhood and youth, to adulthood? Why is one attracted to this person and not that, in love with her and not him? What drives us to be the person we become? Why was I so terribly disturbed by the idea that I had indeed become my brother Jeff's twin when I broke my neck and paralyzed myself? He was the paralyzed one in my family of four, not I! In chapter 10, "Violence and the Sacred," I write about the evenly-matched competition in physical prowess that marked my childhood with my brother. Then came the day in my life when I was ten or so when my father demanded that my brother and I "fight, fight it out," an action so antithetical to the ways of our household to be shocking. I write,

You consciously admire yourself as a rational, civilized creature, yet all the while repressed thoughts literally too repulsive and ugly to be acknowledged profoundly affect how you live your life. Unbeknownst to you, you're a double agent. The unconscious gathers to it all that must be forgotten and remain beyond conscious reflection if orderly adult life is to be achieved and preserved (95).

Why was I so unrelentingly competitive with Jeff? Why am I so aggressive? Why did I like thinking about myself as his twin? What was it that caused my father to act so unlike himself, and to persist against my mother's tearful pleas?

Freud argues that the only way human beings can assume an apparently integrated and rational "self" is through a process of development that brings the child to accept and respect the symbolic Law of the Father. He names this process the Oedipus complex. An imagined threat of punishment meted out by an all-powerful paternal figure brings about the symbolic sacrifice of a dearly loved and deeply desired object – in a little boy's case, his wish to take the mother for his own and assume the place of the Father must be replaced by an identification with the Father. In the girl's case, an identificatory love of her mother must become instead a desire for the Father. The Father's threat to the boy is the loss of his penis, while the girl is mortified to discover that neither she nor her mother have this valuable organ. Both must sacrifice their attachment to the penis, which becomes in this process an ideal, inorganic symbolic object, the phallus – which represents the Law invested with paternal – indeed patriarchal – authority.

Scholars working with psychoanalysis have argued that this fundamental differentiation, sexual difference, creates the conditions of possibility for language-learning, which depends on differentiating one word from another. (This is the argument advanced by Elizabeth Grosz when discussing the work of feminist theory.) In time, one becomes a "speaking subject," able to represent oneself in

language, and in time achieve an integrated, socially appropriate personhood. But *one never forgets what one has lost*. Those losses, and the fierce discontents and resentments they create, cannot be directly avowed or even remembered, but must be relegated to unconscious life. The unconscious, the very condition of possibility for consciousness, asserts itself in dreams that represent the unthinkable, and drives us to act in ways that are obscure to ourselves. This is how I understand the irruption of violence in my loving family devoted to quietly reasoned, non-violent deliberations.

I use psychoanalysis in my book to explain the power of patriarchal authority to structure familial order. It's one way to understand the uncanny feeling created by the discovering of *two where only one should be*. The Fight had decisively differentiated me from my brother, a separation that was soon cemented by the gender-policing of junior high, when I tried to accommodate myself to feminine ways. I really did try, and, like most seventh graders, wanted desperately to fit in, but my self-disciplining attempts never really did the trick. I was, however, quite awake to the gulf that opened between the boys and the girls, and the intimacy of competition with Jeff was over. Then he got MS, and ineluctably advancing paralysis soon made him as different as could possibly be from myself. How, then, could I find myself just like my brother? Paralysis is, in my experience, horrifying. Psychoanalysis helps me to understand the depth and complexity of that experience.

Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" trans. Alix Strachey (1919), in James Strachey, ed. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. xvii (London: Hogarth Press) 1-21

In this essay, Freud interprets the affect created by a doubling structure of two where only one should be, which is readily associated with twins who look uncannily alike. Reading Freud's essay will give students a better understanding of how he theorizes the uncanny on several levels: 1) a dramatization of the son Nathaniel's fear of castration, 2) the significance of the fascination and creepiness of a lifelike automaton, 3) the doubt whether a scene is fantastic or a representation of real events in the story. Discussion can center not on the intricacies of the Oedipal complex, or any particular psychoanalytic doxa, but rather how repetition – especially the appearance of a *doppelgänger* – is uncanny, and the ways in which repetition can seem at the same time impossible and real. If you have time and think it would be helpful, you could also assign E. T. A. Hoffman's story, "The Sandman," that is the occasion of Freud's essay. That way the students could better understand what's under discussion.

His careful study of the etymology of the German word for uncanny, "unheimlich," is also important, because there he finds that the word has a double meaning that

represents the home as safe and unthreatening/and harboring a threat. This antithesis is internal to the home, the place where children are trained into adulthood.

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), Literature Network (<http://www.online-literature.com/poe/31/>)

This is the story that I refer to in Chapter 17, “The Horror! The Horror!” as a way of dramatizing my fear of a future that is bringing inevitable physical and mental decline. I won’t repeat here the analysis I offer in the book, but will point out that the uncanny couple in the Edgar Allen Poe horror story under discussion is a brother and a sister – an obvious fact, but one that I only realized after working with the text for several days. Similarly, it took me a long time to realize that one of the reasons that George Eliot’s novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, affected me so profoundly is the central brother and sister pair. Such delayed recognitions are, to my thinking, evidence of the feints and denials that are evidence of unconscious life.

Psychoanalysis in *A Body, Undone*

Freud’s analysis of E. T. A Hoffman’s short story, “The Sandman,” focuses on the repeated threat to the protagonist of the loss of his eyes, the terror this evokes in him, and the uncanny uncertainty about what is madness and what reality that Hoffman’s narrative discourse achieves. The first threat is made by the child Nathaniel’s mother, while his nurse adds lurid details to the story of the Sandman. His mother is then trying to get her young son into bed before a mysterious visitor to her father appears – he becomes fearful, and even though his mother tells him, “There is no Sand-man, my dear,” he disbelieves her. He seems to outgrow this childhood terror, but events in his life seem to implacably repeat the threat, eventually driving him mad.

One significant element of Freud’s analysis is his use of the concept of the uncanny, in German “unheimlich,” to signify both the creepy narrative effect of unmotivated and seemingly unstoppable repetition, and also the double structure of subjectivity. He does an extensive etymological investigation into the word “heimlich,” and discovers that it can signify both homely comforts and the opposite, secrets and threats that must be concealed in the home. In other words, “heimlich” is simultaneously “unheimlich.” This etymological study affords Freud an example of the doubling at the heart of subjectivity. Our fears, threats, and unthinkable thoughts are banished to the unconscious, leaving only the homely pleasures of quiet domesticity, but childish childhood terrors and childish resentments are not thereby forgotten. They are repressed, and like the Sand-man in Hoffman’s tale, those will return.

With my injury, the differences that had become such an outsized feature of my adult life with Jeff suddenly seemed to vanish, returning me to a doubling that I had imagined as a way of assuming the privileges granted to a boy, who was expected to desire competition. Paralysis had in our adulthood so clearly made me different from my brother – then I broke my neck, and here we were – the same! Both quadriplegic! It felt like something from the twilight zone, that often featured familiar domestic settings that were somehow terribly off, or a character who suddenly encounters another *just like him*. Which one is the “real” one? Is this just the dramatization of some unbalanced narrator who can’t tell reality from fantasy? Has the doppelgänger brought with him violent events of the past that begin to repeat, it seems, in the present? These are the sort of uncanny effects that depend on a structure of doubling, and a disturbed temporal order that allows for the return of the repressed.

Lying in the hospital I repeatedly thought over the mind-boggling unlikelihood that I and my only sibling would find ourselves paralyzed together. It returned me to my childhood, and affected me as I have tried to represent in Chapter 10. Yet the sense of horrified fascination is also part of Chapter 4, “Falling into Hell.” The central chapters of the book, “Violence and the Sacred” (10) and “Bowels Lead” (11) share in this affect.

Discussion questions:

1. Theory is useful for the concepts that it offers us, as Freud’s work offers Crosby the concept of the uncanny. How does she use this concept? What questions are enabled by psychoanalytic thinking? Perhaps the most important concept that Freud developed is that of the unconscious. How does the unconscious impinge on conscious life and make evident motivations and feelings we can’t easily understand? What does it help Crosby to represent?
2. Freud’s assessment of E. T. A. Hoffman’s story “The Sand-man,” is an important part of his essay on the uncanny. How does he analyze that story? What conclusions does he reach?
3. Chapter 17 is titled “The Horror! The Horror!” – Why do you think Crosby repeats the words? She is concerned with Edgar Allen Poe’s famous horror story “The Fall of the House of Usher.” How does she say that the story works? What are its most powerful features? How is this tale important to her? What does it allow her to think about?

LITERARY STUDIES

I am a professor of English who has always been interested in the formal dimensions of literature, especially the ways that narratives are structured and the ways that metaphors create new knowledge by newly juxtaposing ideas about the world. Metaphor works by transporting an attribute from its supposedly proper domain to another where it is new, foreign, and strange. This fundamental act of estrangement from the already-known is, I think, one of the most profound things that literature can accomplish. Now, more than ever, I need to understand myself in new ways, in the land of quadriplegic paralysis where nothing is as it once was. Well, perhaps “nothing” is a little strong, but you catch my drift.

Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (The University Of Chicago Press, 1990)

Chapter 5, **J Hillis Miller**, “Narrative,” 66-79

Chapter 6, **Thomas McLaughlin**, “Figurative Language,” 80-90

Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 1997, 2011)

Chapter 6, “Narrative,” 83-94

Critical Terms for Literary Study is a rich resource for students of literature, as is *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Both J Hillis Miller’s short essay in *Critical Terms*, “Narrative,” and Jonathan Culler’s introduction to narratology in his little book on literary theory offers students a clear introduction to the significance of literary form. Most importantly for readers of *A Body, Undone*, both critics are interested in what they call the “narrative discourse,” the complex of inferred events, the plotting of those events that determines the order in which they are told to the reader, and the narrative voice that brings them together. Each also explains that we expect a story to have a beginning, middle, and end that brings the story to a satisfying conclusion – and that sometimes writers purposefully frustrate those expectations so as to imagine a new order of things. Each of the essays in *A Body, Undone* could be studied in these terms, as could the sequence of the chapters that make up the book as a whole. While sometimes a first-person narrative can be easily identified with the real-life person who actually wrote the book, literary theory tells us that such an identification is unreliable – at best we know what is called the “ideal author,” that is, the ideas that we have formed about the “real author.” It is easy to slip back and forth between the two, but useful, nonetheless, to distinguish between the function of the narrator and the personhood of the author. Thinking about the structure of the text and what it does and doesn’t tell us about the author provides new apertures for possible understandings of the work as a whole.

Thomas McLaughlin analyzes the troping work of metaphor, which enriches understanding by carrying meaning from one domain to another. I use metaphor when I call my skin “an electrified neoprene wetsuit,” taking the attributes of a wetsuit, which works by keeping next to your skin a layer of water warmed by your body, to describe my skin as biochemically generated electricity coursed through it. Neoprene fits so tightly that you can’t really distinguish where it ends and your skin begins, and my skin no longer felt like “my own,” charged as it was by out-of-control neuronal synapses no longer regulated by my central nervous system. As the poet Andre Lorde famously wrote, “poetry is not a luxury . . . [but] the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (*Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press 1984), 36). McLaughlin carefully explains the metaphoric process by analyzing a poem by William Blake.

Joan Retallack, *Poethical Wager* (University of California Press, 2003)

Chapter 1, “Introduction: Essay as Wager,” 1-19

Joan Retallack writes, “I count on the form of the essay . . . to undertake a particular kind of inquiry that is neither poetry nor philosophy but a mix of logics, dislogics, intuition, repulsion, and wonder.” She writes that the “literary humanities” may produce “unsettling transfiguration[s] of once-familiar terrain” (1). My chapters are each essays that can stand alone. I worked in that form that I might be able to see my life anew, for a cervical 5-6 spinal cord injury changes everything. I use what I have at hand, my long study of literature and literary language, to look straight at the catastrophe that overtook me just after I had turned fifty years old. What had become of me? I needed metaphors to even begin to formulate an answer.

Literary Studies in *A Body Undone*

A Body, Undone is not organized as many accounts of disability are organized, as a chronologically sequential story of illness or injury, followed by rehabilitation, accommodations, and setbacks, that ends, quietly triumphant, with a renewed sense of the preciousness of life. The book is structured recursively, not chronologically, though an attentive reader can piece together something of an autobiographical account. Each chapter treats of an independent problem – human vulnerability, catastrophic injury, memories of my childhood and young adulthood, and repeated encounters with my brother, who was diagnosed with MS when he was in his late 20s. The element that binds the disparate actors and events is the narrator, who directly addresses readers throughout. That empathetic attention allows readers to encounter profound grief and chronic pain without being overwhelmed, and to learn intimate details about caring for a paralyzed body without being over-burdened by the knowledge.

Discussion questions:

1. The chapters of this book are not all organized chronologically. How, then, do they relate to each other? Choose one of the chapters and analyze its structure – its beginning, middle, and end. Does the end create a satisfying conclusion that draws together the concerns of the chapter as a whole? What about the narrative structure of the book? Does the book reach a unifying conclusion? Make sure you support your answers with evidence in the form of quotations or excerpts from the book that support your assertions.
2. Choose a chapter and identify a metaphor that creates what Retallack calls a “swerve” that orients you in a new or surprising way to the topic the author is exploring. Take the time to work out what property, attribute, or idea is being carried out of its ordinary usage to become a figure, as when the child who is the speaker of Blake’s poem calls the lamb’s wool his clothing. Directly addressing the animal personifies it, and the metaphor of clothing further endows the lamb with humanity – we wear clothing, and sheep do not. In that way the lamb can become in the course of the poem the Lamb of God, the Christ whose sacrifice on the cross blesses all humanity, cleansing believers from sin. Crosby’s metaphors will not likely work with the same presumption of Christian belief, but they do make sense – how?
3. Retallack writes, “Any making up forms out of language (poesis) is a practice with a discernible character (ethos).” She’s interested in making the familiar unfamiliar in the hopes that the “geometries of attention” of her writing will orient herself and others to the values her writing endorses: the importance of regarding the world “with a dedicated intensity,” an openness to pleasures and unexpected happiness, and a willingness to be surprised. How do Crosby’s essays fair in this regard? Can you discern the ethical commitments enacted by her writing? In the concluding essay of *A Body, Undone: Living on after Great Pain*, Crosby writes directly about the process of writing as she reflects back on a completed project. Compare and contrast her conclusion to the concluding paragraphs of Retallack’s essay.

FEMINISM

Feminist commitments have been among of the most consequential of my life, opening to me new possibilities for self-understanding as a somewhat awkward seventeen-year-old sick of the politics, including the heterosexist politics, of my high school. I read Simone de Beauvoir, and that celebrated sentence “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” still has the power to move me. I discovered ways of thinking about living in language that I found positively apocalyptic, opening to me a vision of the project of “becoming a woman” more expansive than any I had known before. As I took up my work at Wesleyan, language and representation were both in ascendance in the humanities and interpretive social sciences, with wide-spread recognition that none of us live outside of language, though the borders have since proven porous. The feminist theories advanced in those heady times have continued to help me think about what it means to become a woman, and how we can use what we know to think beyond the seemingly intractable injustices that gender creates, and think again about what we understand by sex and sexuality. Perhaps most importantly, reading feminist theory has taught me to ask: who speaks? And *in whose terms*?

Elizabeth Grosz, “The Practice of Feminist Theory,” *differences* (2010) 21.1, 94-108

Elizabeth Grosz addresses the complexities of imagining a different and better world than the one in which we live. She argues for a practice of feminist theory that creates new concepts able to productively refigure thought, and looks to “sexual difference” as such a concept. She refers to Luce Irigaray, who argues that sexual difference is “a project addressing the future.” We do not yet know who or what women might be, Grosz argues, because women are always secondary, the afterthought in a world where “man” remains the universally comprehensive signifier of humanity. Moreover, “woman” does not refer to a unified subject, but to one that is always and already internally differentiated – she is “this sex which is not one.” The abstraction “woman” cannot, therefore, be understood through the man/woman binary structure that is now simply assumed to be the case. Sexual difference thereby emerges as a problem for thought that productively links with all efforts to know what is radically other than myself.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (University Of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313

“Can the Subaltern Speak” is Gayatri Spivak’s critically important critique of “epistemological violence” such as that committed by British colonialist power in nineteenth-century South Asia. The subaltern in question is a Brahman widow who sacrifices herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. She is unable to “speak” because she is spoken for first. British imperialists see her as a victim and are anxious to save her

from a barbaric rite – Brahman men opposed to Imperial rule refuse this definition, and declare the ceremony and the widow’s actions a spiritual practice. She herself cannot speak *because the terms of the conversation are already set*. She can only shuttle back and forth between these two poles. Spivak argues that we must learn to question the conditions under which events become intelligible, and oppressive concepts are understood as neutral, true descriptions of the world. No one, not you, not me, and certainly not the women silenced in the colonial/anti-colonial struggle, can “simply” answer the question, who are you?

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, reprint edition (Crossing Press Feminist Series, 2007)

In this collection of essays and speeches, Audre Lorde develops ideas that have now passed into everyday usage – “poetry is not a luxury,” “silence will not protect you,” “the erotic is a source of power,” and “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” In doing so she speaks directly about the many differences that divide women in America, none more abruptly than race, though class, sex, and age also create significantly different life experiences. She speaks of differences in order to develop a more robust unity of feminist purpose, and writes in the first-person, thereby demonstrating how thinking is a part of everyday life, and feminist theory a practice available to all women who wish to think hard and honestly about their place in the world. She also speaks directly about how she feels when confronted with the possibility of breast cancer – that very quickly became the lived reality of having breast cancer. In this she models a way of thinking and working that seeks to see clearly and speak plainly about the facts of life, including sex and death. Always alert to difference, she argues that the strength of feminism depends on our ability to understand the differences among women in order to build a stronger unity.

Feminism in *A Body Undone*

These three works all stress the importance of studying how we know what we know, and how to critically engage concepts that enable and support oppressive or exploitative relationships. Such an epistemological starting point was the focus of my scholarly work before my accident, and is now necessary to me. My bodymind has been so violently and radically remade that I must know myself anew.

Feminism taught me long ago that the personal is the political. That framework for understanding enabled me to see that I could not depend on the usual narratives about disability in which disability memoirs repeatedly tell the story of bravely facing challenges until all is well at the end of the story. I bring this feminist insight together with the idea that I am now daily confronted with the dereliction of disability – all the ways in which “disabled” people are invisible, persons to be pitied and “taken care of”

by charitable institutions. Or they are hyper visible, seen as inspiring examples of grit and determination in triumphing over adversity. Scholars and activists have rejected these ideas about what disability means. They are both patronizingly inadequate and truly oppressive, as are white patriarchal ideas about women. I began writing about my body because it was in fundamental ways unrecognizable to me – I was bewildered by the scope of my injuries. Feminism also reminds us to attend to the labor that happens in private so that our public world can be what it is. After I had completed rehabilitation and returned to work, my friends and colleagues only saw me after a great deal of labor had already been expended by myself and by others to produce me for my public. No one had any idea of what happened in the private home. How could they? The energy and resource-draining daily labor of reproducing myself was invisible, which made me feel invisible. Feminism has long thought about that intractable linking of domesticity, reproduction, and women’s labor, and emboldened me to write openly about what many might think are private matters.

Because I have been for decades a committed feminist, I also wanted to understand how my bodily incapacities and social disablement affected my gender. And because I have since 1972 been an out and happy lesbian, I wanted to know how the new conditions of my life affected my sexuality. These themes run throughout the book. They appear most painfully in Chapter 11, “Bowels Lead,” and most positively in Chapter 12, “I’m Your Physical Lover,” dedicated to the joy of sex. In chapter 7, “Masculine, Feminine, or Fourth of July,” I think through how my gender changed both to me and to others after the accident, and in chapter 10, “Violence and the Sacred,” I reflect back on how my brother and I grew up, and how life in our family created the person I am and the person he was – both before his MS and after that progressive and incurable disease and killed him in his mid-50s. Because questions of gender and sexuality are so important to me, I doubt that there’s a chapter in the book that doesn’t somehow engage these concepts.

Discussion questions:

1. Each of the supplementary essays you have been assigned understands feminist theory as an epistemological undertaking that inquires into the many ways that women are differentiated from men. Elizabeth Grosz sees that differentiation of the sexes to be the central problem for feminism, and argues that feminist theory offers the opportunity to think critically about how sexual difference is imagined and how socially instantiated and upheld. Think through the chapters of *A Body, Undone* and identify one in which the difference between boys and girls, and men and women is explicitly addressed, and say why you think it is important to Crosby.
2. Gayatri Spivak's famously difficult and important work addresses how gender and sexuality are articulated by colonial power and by the colonized people's opposition to colonial rule. In concluding her essay she writes, "The subaltern cannot speak," but the analysis has also shown that no one can simply speak or directly represent him, her, or themselves. All efforts at self-representation must first reflect on how the "self" is intelligible to others and, therefore, to oneself. Moreover, because women are structurally disadvantaged in relation to men, women are more readily aware of gender as a structuring inequity. Where in *A Body, Undone* do you find Crosby explicitly asking about how she knows what she knows? Or reflecting on how gender is always inflected by power?
3. To work for the liberation of all women, Audre Lorde writes in the first-person to develop her thinking about the differences that divide women along different axes of power – race, class, sex, age, ability. She emphasizes the ways in which lived experience creates important knowledge that should be recognized as knowledge, written, spoken, and shared. Crosby's book is labeled as a memoir, and is written in the first-person. How does she use the first-person representation of her experience to think about abstract ideas? How does each author think and write about feminism? How is feminism important to both? What contributions do you think each book makes to feminist studies?

QUEER STUDIES

The field of queer studies moves readers beyond what we think we know about love, sex, bodies, literature, power, politics and knowledge. Queer is in this sense a happening. The term, brought into use as a repudiation of what was once a slur, has come to signify work that desires to understand the true strangeness of sexuality and the ways that desire can urge you on to make a livable life for yourself and your compatriots. Queer work looks askance at institutions that have done their oppressive work for centuries – The Family, for example, that abstraction that is the private unit to which social goods are allotted, or marriage, an institution held up as the centerpiece of domestic life that fails nearly half of those who enter into it. The two books below are wonderfully rich resources for anyone needing to think about incapacitated bodyminds and social disablement. The “then and there” of queer thought and the world-making force of both of these books is abundantly queer, and capacious enough to accommodate disability.

José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009) “Introduction: Feeling Utopia,” 1-18

Chapter 1, “Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism,” 19-32

In *Cruising Utopia*, the performance studies scholar José Muñoz turns to Ernst Bloch, a twentieth-century philosopher of utopian hope who writes in the Marxian tradition. In doing so Muñoz reorients performance studies, giving performances and the spaces of performance a material afterlife that becomes in his hands an opening to a queer future. He turns to the recent past in order to look forward, to what he calls “the then and there of queer futurity,” an ideal way of life in a utopian future that would nourish and support queer lives that are now despised and rejected.

Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Graywolf Press, 2015)

Maggie Nelson creates an unclassifiable book in *The Argonauts*. She calls it a work of “auto-theory,” which it most certainly is, bringing her capacity for openness and ability to suspend judgment to the making of both art and life. Quotations from a host of writers and theorists join her words on the page. It is also a sustained declaration of her love for the artist Harry Dodge, and a record of their decision to make a family. She gets pregnant, and when swimming in a hormonal soup and growing another body inside of her own, Nelson says she has never felt more profoundly queer. Dodge’s body is radically changing, as well. He has top surgery, a double mastectomy done by a physician who knows how to save the pectoral muscles when removing the breasts, and he begins injecting testosterone. All the while he insists that he is trans-ing, an errancy that is *not* headed for some predestined place. In other words, he doesn’t want

to “be” a man, but is choosing to change his body to feel more like himself. Nelson’s account will doubtless be classified as a memoir, but it is truly *sui generis*. She writes in short paragraphs, and creates a narrative that uses their juxtaposition to create complexly interacting lines of thought, structured to create a very loose chronology. The form of the book is as singular as the lives that it represents – the narrative meditates on what is to be gained by being still, the strangeness of being a step-parent, the complexities of being a mother, the outrageous demands of sexual desire and our squeamishness in the face of that fact, the irrationality of love. In short, life itself.

Queer Studies in *A Body Undone*

These two writers develop critically complex, artistically compelling accounts that orient readers to a hopeful future, even as they each work with the materials of memory and recollection. To imagine a queer future that remains to come, in *Cruising Utopia* Muñoz reads recent world-making work of queer performers who attracted a public perversely uninterested in the integrationist approaches of mainstream LGBTQ movement. Marriage holds no charms for them. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson’s passion for Dodge is reciprocated, and attunement that resonates throughout the text. When the right to marry was threatened in California, they got married. Nelson characterizes their nuptials by quoting Deleuze: “There are no longer binary machines – question-answer, masculine-feminine, man-animal, etc. this could be what a conversation is – simply the outline of a becoming.”

Chapter 7, “Masculine, Feminine, or Fourth of July” tracks how I felt my gender changing as I lived on after spinal cord injury. With my short hair and wheelchair, my gestalt is decidedly masculine – in part, because a preponderance of spinal cord injuries are sustained by young men. The “sex chapter,” as my lover calls Chapter 12, discusses both my gender and my sexuality – the accident radically changed both, but left untouched our love for each other. Chapter 14, “Shameless Hussy, Babe D., Moxie Doxie,” describes my home life with my dogs, and explains that my favored social form is the pack, rather than the family. Chapter 15, “Anabaptist Reformations,” on the other hand, offers the fullest recollection in the book of my childhood and youth in my nuclear family, and acknowledges that I was shaped by a religious tradition in which I no longer worship, but which is, nonetheless, still a part of me, as we carry with us into adulthood the impress of childhood. Queerness runs throughout the book.

Discussion questions:

1. How do you characterize *The Argonauts*? Some have called it a memoir, but it is a memoir unlike any other. How? Crosby writes about her relationship with Nelson,” and quotes from her poetry, and Nelson writes about having Crosby as a professor when an undergraduate in college. Both write about embodiment, but the experiences of the bodies in question are very different, but equally important to both writers. Discuss how. What are points of convergence and divergence? What do the texts do differently to bring those bodies before the imagination of readers? What does each author seem to presuppose about their audiences – in other words, what did you need to know already in order to make sense of the book?
2. José Muñoz’s books and articles have been indispensable to the conceptualization of queer theory and development of queer studies. In *Cruising Utopia*, he insists on the “then and there of queer futurity,” and declares that queer remains to come. What, then, of the gay liberation movement? What of the triumphant securing of the civil right to marry and to serve openly in the military?
3. What did you learn in reading these books that helped you to understand what Crosby is doing in *A Body, Undone*. How might these books be helpful to a disabled person, and how do they relate to the field of disability studies?

Another way of approaching *A Body, Undone: Living on after Great Pain* is through topics that I return to over the course of the book. Approaching the book through theory and approaching it through topics allows you to emphasize different chapters and group them together for discussion. Listed below are some such topics, though there are many more that study of the book might address. Under each topic are two or three sources that came to mind as I considered the problems I was addressing, all of which I called upon when I was writing the book. As you will see, caring work and domestic labor more generally matter a great deal to me, and can be approached in a number of ways.

Norms & “Livable Life”

- Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, 2004)
 - Chapter 3, “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality”
- Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Harvard University Press, 1991) “On Being the Object of Property (a gift of intelligent rage)”
 - Chapter 1, “Your Puny, Vulnerable Self”
 - Chapter 5, “Caring at the Cash Nexus”
 - Chapter 7, “Masculine, Feminine, or Fourth of July”
 - Chapter 10, “Violence and the Sacred”
 - Chapter 12, “I’m Your Physical Lover”
 - Chapter 15, “Anabaptist Reformations”
 - Chapter 18, “Living on

Embodiment/illness

- Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, Special Edition (San Francisco: aunt lute books, 1997)
- Lochlann S. Jain, “Cancer Butch,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 22 (2007)
- Lisa Diedrich, “Breaking down: a Phenomenology of Disability”, *Literature and Medicine* (Fall 2001) 20.2, 209-230
 - Chapter 1, “Your Puny, Vulnerable Self”
 - Chapter 3, “Bewilderment”
 - Chapter 4, “Falling into Hell”
 - Chapter 8, “Time Held Me Green and Dying”
 - Chapter 9, “Jefferson Clark Crosby”
 - Chapter 11, “Bowels Lead”
 - Chapter 18, “Living On”

Pain

- Eula Biss, "The Pain Scale," *Harper's*, June 2005
- Susannah Mintz, "Life Writing and Lyric Pain," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, (2011) 5.3, 243-259
- Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, eds., *Keywords for Disability Studies #43*, Martha Stoddard Holmes, "Pain," 133-134
 - Chapter 1, "Your Puny, Vulnerable Self"
 - Chapter 4, "Falling into Hell"
 - Chapter 17, "The Horror! The Horror!"
 - Chapter 18, "Living On"

Home Economics

- Silvia Federici, *Revolution at .0: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press)
- Rhaqel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work* (Stanford University Press, 2002)
 - "Introduction"
 - "The International Division of Reproductive Labor"
 - Chapter 5, "Caring at the Cash Nexus"
 - Chapter 13, "Supply and Demand"

Caring Labor

- Premilla Nadasen and Tiffany Williams, *Valuing Domestic Work* (Barnard Center for Research on Women, New Feminist Solutions 5) <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/wp-content/nfs/reports/NFS5-Valuing-Domestic-Work.pdf>
- Janet R Jakobsen, "Work Is Not the Only Problem: How the Concept of Family Contributes to the Work-Family Dilemma," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 23.2 (2007)
- Michael Rembis, "Introduction," in Michael Rembis, ed., *Disabling Domesticity* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 1-24
- Laura Mauldin, "A Feminist Technoscientific Approach to Disability and Caregiving in the Family," *Disabling Domesticity*, 137-162
- Grace Chang, "Inevitable Intersections: Care, Work, and Citizenship," *Disabling Domesticity*, 163-194
 - Chapter 5, "Caring at the Cash Nexus"
 - Chapter 13, "Supply and Demand"

Slow Death/Biopolitics

- Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2012) Chapter 3, "Slow Death (Obesity, Sovereignty, Lateral Agency)"
- Lisa Diedrich, "Speeding up Slow Deaths: Medical Sovereignty Circa 2005," *MediaTropes eJournal* 3.1 (2011)
 - Chapter 1, "Your Puny, Vulnerable Self"
 - Chapter 5, "Caring at the Cash Nexus"