

My body, my closet: Invisible disability and the limits of coming-out discourse.

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My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse

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My Body, My Closet

Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse

The Limits of Analogy

A story: On a breezy afternoon one April I met with "Samantha," a student in an undergraduate course on literature and disability, to talk about her paper on cultural images of burn survivors. After showing me her draft, she remained, eager to talk about issues of disability and visibility, about her own experience as a person who appears "normal" until one looks closely enough to see the scars on her jaw and neck, the puckered skin that disappears under the neck of her T-shirt and reappears on her arm and wrist. Since I almost always look "normal" despite my disabling chronic illness, I sympathized with her struggle over how and when to come out about her disability identity. "My parents don't understand why I would call myself disabled," Samantha said matter-of-factly; then she added with a mischievous grin, "In fact, there are two basic things my family just doesn't want to accept: that my cousin is gay and that I'm disabled. So we're going to take a picture of ourselves at a gay pride march next month and send it to them."

The moral: I admire Samantha's wit and intelligence. I am also struck by the convergence of many themes in her story: the shifting and contested meanings of disability; the uneasy, often self-destructing tension between appearance and identity; the social scrutiny that refuses to accept statements of identity without "proof"; and, finally, the discursive and practical connections between coming out—in all the meanings of the term—as queer and as disabled. Thus I begin with Samantha's story to frame a discussion not only of analogies between queerness and disability but of the specifics of coming out in each context as a person whose bodily appearance does not immediately signal one's own sense of identity. In the first section of this essay I consider the complicated dynamics inherent in the analogizing of social identities, with specific reference to feminist, queer, and **[End Page 233]** disability studies. In the second section I turn to the politics of visibility and invisibility, drawing on autobiographical narratives as well as social theory to explore constructions of coming out or passing in a number of social contexts. In the third section I further explore these issues through a focus on two "invisible" identities: lesbian-femme and nonvisible disability.¹ Thus each section seeks to "queer" disability in order to develop new paradigms of identity, representation, and social interaction.

A number of disability theorists suggest that disability has more in common with sexual orientation than with race, ethnicity, or gender—other categories often invoked analogically to support the social model of disability.² One argument for this connection is that most people with disabilities, like most queers, do not share their identity with immediate family members and often have difficulty accessing queer or crip culture.³ The history of an oppressive medical model for homosexuality and the nature-nurture and assimilation-transformation debates in the modern LGBT civil rights movement offer additional areas of potential common ground with disability activism. Haunting such arguments, however, is the vexed issue of analogy itself, which cannot be extracted from the tangled history of the use and misuse of such identity analogies in past liberation movements.

In particular, most current analogies between oppressed social identities draw in some fashion on the sex-race analogy that emerged from the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. This analogy was used primarily by white women to claim legitimacy for feminist political struggle by analogizing it to the struggle of African Americans for civil rights. The sex-race analogy has been extensively critiqued, most importantly by feminists of color, and has by now been renounced by most white feminists. The gist of such a critique is suggested...

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GLQ 9:1–2

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