

# Disability Histories

Edited by  
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## CHAPTER 6

# Disability Things

## Material Culture and American Disability History, 1700–2010

KATHERINE OTT

**KEYWORDS:** *Centuries:* eighteenth; nineteenth; twentieth; twenty-first; *Sources:* artifacts; *Themes:* culture; family, daily life, and community; citizenship and belonging; bodies, medicine, and contested knowledge; theory

Joystick. Velcro. TV remote. Straitjacket. Communication board. White cane. Sex toy. Thorazine. Wedding ring. Wheelchair. Curb cut. Cochlear implant.<sup>1</sup> The experience of disability, as is all human experience, is grounded in the human body and mediated through the environment. The environment is constituted of the culture-bound material culture of its era and includes architecture, assistive devices, media, clothing, food, technology, and all the other objects that surround us. Human relationships are established and mediated through these objects. Both the artifacts owned and used by people with disabilities and those that are used upon them or that are encountered in life create possibilities, impose limits, assert political and ideological positions, and shape identity. This chapter considers artifacts as primary evidence and offers examples of how the history of disability shifts into new registers when studied through its material culture. It proceeds from the assumption that artifacts actively shape and define disability.<sup>2</sup>

Two broad themes emerge from a material culture approach to the history of disability. First, disability is relational. As an identity, position, category of analysis, affinity, or life experience, disability is created through relationships among people, with things, to power and resources. These relationships are shaped by the senses and are sometimes connected to language. Disability is both a personal,

individual experience and a collective one. Disability scholars have established that it is essential to understand disability as a cultural and social phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> Relations between group members and the state, the community, families, and other representatives of authority are mediated by material culture, and social relations are revealed through object relations.<sup>4</sup>

Second, disability is unique in the extent to which it is bonded with technology, tools, and machines as a medium of social interaction. Most struggles for civil rights address issues such as segregation, exclusion, paternalism, and discrimination. Unlike people who are singled out because of racial, gender, and sexuality differences, people with disabilities usually require accommodation to overcome barriers to sensory, physical, or neural processing. This entails material change in addition to legal and legislative action.

### **On Material Culture**

As categories of definition and analysis, race, gender, and sexuality inhabit many of the same material spaces as disability. Their relationships to power, normalcy, and access to rights and civic experiences have physical, three-dimensional manifestations. Objects such as skin lighteners, hair straighteners, cosmetic surgeries, dresses and leather pants, bus lifts, and bar stools are the material props through which cultural identity is interpreted. Identities, dreams, fears, desires, and everyday lives are all grounded in the material world. Nearly thirty years ago, Michel de Certeau described how ordinary people appropriate and manipulate cultural products that do not originate with them. Consumers creatively reshape power and expressive relationships as they traverse the worlds in which they are caught.<sup>5</sup> Yet we seldom think about the interactions and relationships among ourselves, what we know, and the material world. Material culture is the concrete, sensory zone of reality that emerges from the psychic matrix of cultural information. A person who uses a rigid pole to navigate along the sidewalk is immersed in the cultural formations of urban design, visual impairment, materials science, and community.

Objects give a tactile, sensory dimension to the past. They provide access to lived experience and nonverbal aspects of relationships. For historians, one of the most difficult modalities of peoples' lives to retrieve from the past is how bodies move. Documentation of the significant relationship between control or the perceived lack of control and people with disabilities is limited. Bodies that are unmodulated in movement, speech, or thought, those that cause a scene or bring attention to themselves because they do not fulfill standards of etiquette, are hard to recover. Historical documentation of people in motion, especially bodies that move in unconventional ways has existed only since the advent of cinema. Media footage is ideal but rare. Objects can help restore that lost knowledge. The heft of

a prosthetic limb, the rigidity of a brace, the absence of padding on wheels, the size and shape of an ear trumpet, a boot with four-inch soles, lenses tinted green or rose—these objects document movement.

The histories of nations, economies, and power are constructed through concepts of race, gender, and sexuality. The interdependence of these elements is well established. We study gender, race, and sexuality not as add-ons but as constituents of what it means to be human. The analytical category of disability is beginning to be understood as constituting gender, race, and sexuality and nations, economies, and power.<sup>6</sup> Physicality and capacity, including disability, configures what we know about the world and our relationship to it. Material culture is the literal, physical constituent of everything, of course. But more important, material culture conveys information. It demonstrates figurations of disability, race, gender, and sexuality.

In addition, disability is no more dichotomous than race, gender, and sexuality are. A person is not either/or. These concepts are flexible and culture-bound, and boundaries shift across eras and locations. Dirt streets, blue jeans, hairstyles, census categories, and barbecues are specific to times and places. The boundaries of disability also shift from person to person, depending on things such as where a person is, what she or he is doing, whether a person is feeling safe or excluded, or what and how many resources are available. Disability is also dynamic and contextual. No one is always disabled for all things; disability depends on the person, the environment, and the activity. Historical context provides crucial information about these issues. Material culture is a fruitful resource for understanding how such abstract configurations are created and for comprehending their flexibility.

Disability artifacts circulate within spheres of exchange. These spheres may be as informal as a parent adapting a toy or one neighbor bartering for the use of a vehicle in exchange for assistance with grocery shopping. In northern California in the 1970s, Ed Roberts gave a respirator that he no longer used to Paul Longmore, constituting both recycling and a form of gift-giving. Formal exchange includes all the ways people with disabilities have become both participants in and targets of a lucrative commercial market through their purchases of consumer products, special-purpose devices, health services, and similar commodities.<sup>7</sup>

Value is fluid: the value of an object and its benefit for the parties involved in the exchange varies with each transaction. All objects possess value that depends upon human emotion, rarity, aesthetic appearance, history, and other ineffable qualities.<sup>8</sup> Some transactions can create parity, such as the procurement of voice-activated software in the workplace or the placement of elevating blocks under a desk. The same blocks have a different meaning when they are used under a conjugal bed or a dining room table. Other transactions amplify possibilities, such as the key that a state hospital inmate fashioned from the found materials of nails wrapped in wire. The key's components, things that were commonly used in construction,



**Figure 6.1.** The value of discarded materials suddenly increases when someone finds them useful. An unknown inmate at Wisconsin's Winnebago Mental Health Institute wrapped this nail with copper wire to craft this key. Courtesy of Division of Medicine and Science, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

had been discarded and repurposed. The key itself likely increased the personal worth of the key-maker through its potential for an encounter with a lock that would yield to it.<sup>9</sup>

It is essential to analyze closely the exchange, the artifact, and the desires of all those involved. Because power often is inequitably distributed, the agency of people with disabilities may be thwarted in the transaction and in analysis of the transaction. Objectification, especially through the use of metaphor, impedes and skews understanding of the relationship of material culture to disability. For example, metaphor intervenes when prosthetics become analogs for power, capacity, access, or identity or when the experience of disability becomes a frontier or borderland for traversing social terrain. This is not to condemn the use of metaphor but rather to highlight its pitfalls when working with material culture. People are neither metaphors nor abstractions. Objects provide direct and literal experience. Figurative analysis, because of its reliance upon language, does not work well for many of the core issues in material culture analysis.<sup>10</sup>

Language is limited in its utility for interpreting material culture on several fronts.<sup>11</sup> For one thing, words are general and experience is individual and specific. For example, a curb cut is understood as a ramped area on street corners, but the particular, individual characteristics of every curb cut are different. The angle, the state of repair, the width, and the direction in which it feeds vary widely. The metaphoric spirit of curb cuts is not equivalent to any actual curb cut. Consequently, the words are misleading. They create a unity that does not really exist. Another important difference is that objects are the thing that words are about. The words convey the meaning but do not embody it. Objects provide a direct experience, not a mediated

or facilitated one. This is particularly important in relation to communication styles and preferences. Some people primarily rely upon sensory thinking—understanding through tactile or other sensory modes. Sensory thinking does not follow linguistic logic and syntax. Touching a thing communicates different information than spelling and reading the word. In certain kinds of neural difference, the person comprehends everything first as a visual image and then as letters and words.

## On Theory

In material culture, as elsewhere, theory is important for what can be accomplished with it. Application of theory to a concrete, practical field that is constituted by hands-on work such as material culture can produce intellectual gymnastics that are interesting to observe but ultimately unfruitful. Objects are the things themselves and have physical presence. Theories recreate aspects of objects in abstract form and rely on words and the willingness of the theorist to create understanding. A cautious examination of several theories of especial relevance to disability and material culture follows.

Disability is relational and an essential convergence is the one that takes place between person and thing. The conceptual difference between a thing and an object merits a closer look. Bill Brown's "thing theory" attempts to make sense of the thing-object intersection. For him, things are what circulate around us, the large and small bits of matter that we encounter in the world. Once we notice them by projecting a thought onto them, whether by chance ideation or the deliberate naming of them, they become objects. Things are abstract, partially comprehended instances of material form. A hollow plastic tube for drinking becomes a straw. The thing is perceived, a use is imagined, and a name is assigned. Brown explains that simply by noticing or interacting with something, we render it an object.<sup>12</sup> This distinction helps explain the flow from unawareness to consciousness and the role of objects in the interaction. It also gives definition to the threshold between thing and object.

Objectification of the world is a constant and unavoidable pitfall. Objectification can happen easily when studying people without things and things without people. It is inherent in our apprehension of the world and is a thorn in all scholarly work. The problem of objectification has no satisfying resolution. We are, ultimately, simply our singular selves and everything beyond us is an object of our consciousness. We humans cannot transcend our objectification of what surrounds us. Pragmatically then, in relation to the study of objects, analysis needs to be capacious, open, and inclusive of numerous possibilities. Theory helps in this, but it can misdirect significance and derail a full discussion of the power and function that objects carry.

Two areas in which objects are intensely attractive but objectification can become a trap are Actor Network Theory and its close relative, Affect Theory. Actor Network Theory has been influential in material culture through its use by historians of science and technology, anthropologists, and archeologists. Affect Theory is the cultural studies, literary criticism, and political science version (vital materiality). Scholars interested in Affect Theory have begun to embrace disability studies.<sup>13</sup> The interdisciplinary nature of the theory makes its application slippery. This theoretical area is fraught with the potential for objectifying of people with disabilities and the associated dangers of that process. Consequently, the relationship of ANT and AT to disability material culture bears examination.

The concept of “affect” as used in Affect Theory is understood as the aptitude for causing an effect, that is, the aptitude for being an actant. Affect refers to the capacity to act and be acted upon. It encompasses gestures, motions and movements, linguistic meanings, and other influences on encounters among beings. Beings may be animate or inanimate; humans are only one contributor to the dynamism of the world.<sup>14</sup> Although people with disabilities are folded into the monolith of humans, human history is not so simple or reductive.

Designating people with disabilities as simply another genre of actants—that is, as equivalent agents with animals, other humans, and inanimate forms—ignores the history of disability and the power wielded by others over “the thing.” Humans, animals, and objects are not equivalent; history and experience demonstrate otherwise. It is true that objects have agency and take on a life of their own, but all actants are not equal, and effect is uneven. Creating equivalency among all actants in a network erases the uneven histories of oppression among them. Among human populations, people with disabilities have an enduring history of oppression that has yet to be acknowledged or integrated into scholarship and common comprehension. As a consequence, the embedded necessity of speaking for “others” undermines the applicability of the theory.

Here, objectification has another, more subtle role in the material culture of disability. People with disabilities experience objectification and essentialization on a daily basis, whether through being invisible to others or as a focus for staring or the aversion of a gaze.<sup>15</sup> The very language of Affect Theory requires more inspection and qualification. Terms such as “thing,” “it,” and “object,” which are commonly used in Affect Theory, have been used to refer to people with disabilities in literature, art, and vernacular speech. In encounters that stigmatize, a “thing” is an unknown, incoherent mass, not necessarily human. With recognition and awareness, she or he transitions to object. The move to “human” follows next. Within Affect Theory, the comprehension of nonhuman affect relies upon a metaphorical understanding of actants beyond the observer. Yet people are not

metaphors. People with disabilities exist in real time and space. They are not figurative versions of something or somebody else.

The application of theory in any context raises ethical issues related to paternalism and the act of speaking for others. Theory can be the handmaiden of power by creating categories, circumscribing possibilities, and imposing the will of the theorist. Should theories be understood and accessible to those who are theorized about? This is an especially important question for people who have historically been spoken for and about but have seldom had the opportunity to represent themselves. People who communicate with signs and gestures or who do not formulate sentences and concepts in ways that are acceptable or understandable beyond their family or community nonetheless have a claim on the legitimacy of what is said about them and how such statements are used. The history of disability includes numerous struggles by groups and individuals, such as People First, Self Advocates, and Psychiatric Survivors, to make professionals accountable for the theories they have created about them.

And finally, theory can be a method of containment. It can directly or indirectly kill diversity, creativity of expression, and wildness. Its purpose is to explain and make sense of the confusing peculiarities of existence. The history of disability is full of examples of attempts to manage the unmanageable. People make convenient but inadequate metaphors. In short, application of theory requires constant vigilance and sharing of power. The contribution of Exchange Theory, Thing Theory, Actor Network/Affect Theory, and others to our understanding of the material culture of disability is that they draw attention to the politics of how people and things connect in the world. They loosen the constrictions of the modern body that is bounded and defined by medical frameworks and its technological relations.

## **On Technology**

In its relationship to disability, technology leads a symbolically dense existence both because of the place of technology in modern culture and because of the nature of disability. Since at least the mid-twentieth century, the realm of technology has eclipsed human dignity and reputation in significant ways. The efficiency of technologies of war, medicine, and science surpass human capacities. Moreover, those who wield technology, who dispense it, control, invent, and regulate it, usually have a tenuous connection to its recipients. Technology rules our lives. Modern technologies assure that no life is beyond danger from them.

Disability differs markedly from other subjectivities that have been marginalized and disfranchised because of its need for technology. Reliance upon technology to facilitate life's activities or to counter barriers is equally or more important than

legislative and legal action. Technology, whether as a tool, a machine, a device, or a simple artifact is inseparable from disability. And in the perception of many typically-abled people, a person with a disability often becomes merged with the technology she or he uses—“the one in the wheelchair,” “the artificial voice guy.” Consequently, technology inhabits a suspect yet essential space in the material culture of disability.

Basic life activities such as dressing, eating, bathing, and shopping are tied to one’s capacity to use objects or actual people as aids. At least since the 1950s in the United States, a formal relationship between people and objects has been used for evaluative purposes. First with the elderly and then adapted for use with people with disabilities, tests that measure a person’s capacity to engage in activities of daily living (ADLs) are used by social workers and health care providers to assess a person’s functionality and determine the level of government benefits available. Mastery of objects is the conceptual basis for assessment. Does the person do personal laundry, use the telephone, manage his or her own medication, shop independently?<sup>16</sup> A person’s access to resources relies upon appropriate use of material culture. Objects are thus symbols of “competency.” The linking of competency to facility with tools is a throwback to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century anthropologies of civilization. Scientists ranked a peoples’ relationship to savagery by assessing the degree to which they used technologies such as railroads, telegraphs, and weaponry. Eugenics provided the scaffold for this organizing hierarchy from inferior to superior. Technology use continues as an evaluative metric. Although the eugenic underpinnings are hidden, worthiness of assistance and implied civic worth are often symbolized by technology.<sup>17</sup>

The objects disabled people use to perform daily activities also illustrate how technology makes disability situational. Adapted flatware, adult sippy cups, Velcro, hearing aids, TV remotes, and garage door openers serve the same purposes as smoke alarms, electric can openers, and air conditioners in creating personal independence through technological dependency. The absence of or availability of a specific device can radically alter the environment and can consequently create or remove exclusion: a lift on the bus that works, a door handle with a lever arm, a captioning chip. A person in one situation is independent and in a different environment is disabled. In addition, every technology is assistive and objects themselves are neutral. For example, at what point does comfort become categorized as assistive? The stigmatization of the boundaries of use between some bodies and others is largely arbitrary. For example, are the neck pillows and reclining seats for long airplane trips comfort items or are they assistive devices?

Many technologies used for daily life fall under the medical classification. Medical engineering has traditionally played a central role in creating commodities for people with disabilities. The medical model of disability, in turn, influences object

design. Medical inventors and designers share the goal of creating devices and objects that make the person as “whole” as possible. They work from the assumption that disability is a deficit that needs to be fixed or ameliorated. This is a core principle of the medical model of disability and continues to dominate rehabilitation and therapeutic practice. This approach entails an aesthetic of discretion. Engineers strive to minimize the visibility of the “fix” and maximize wholeness.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, function is primary and the beauty of the device is secondary. Engineers tend to be interested primarily in how the device works. Product designers attend to consumer appeal and are not usually part of the development team. The results are functional but usually drab objects.

Equally problematic, development teams usually create prototype equipment and products without the participation of people with a range of bodily differences. People with disabilities often have a more complicated aesthetic when they serve as designers/inventors or consumers. Their relationship with the artifact is more intimate and enduring. Leg braces, helmets, leg bags, and ports are worn on the body and impinge on all the issues related to clothing and fashion. Wearing a technology orients the consumer in a different and more complicated register. For example, a split hook prosthetic hand is visibly different from a human hand and is more functional than an articulated hand for most uses. But wearing a split hook may have limitations for the hand-holding that accompanies courtship and romance. A telescoping white cane instead of a rigid one or a sports wheelchair make political and ideological statements about the users to others. The aesthetics of rehabilitation in hospitals reflect a hierarchy in which the consumer is near the bottom. These are aesthetic considerations that go beyond engineering specifications.

Aesthetics, then, are illustrative of power. The technology associated with polio demonstrates these power dynamics as expressed through objects. Poliomyelitis is an enterovirus that was first described in 1789. It is ingested and from the gut it travels through the blood to the central nervous system and motor neurons. There it produces so much virus that the cell membranes burst open and die. The death of motor neurons causes paralysis in the muscles connected with them. The first reported cases of polio in the United States were in Vermont in 1894. Polio infections peaked in this country in 1952. Today, vaccination is performed on children using either liquid drops of greatly weakened (“live”) virus or an injection of inactivated (“dead”) virus.

The history of vaccination to prevent the disease is rich in material culture.<sup>19</sup> The use of the polio vaccine illustrates the intimacy of medical artifacts, disability, and authority. Polio is the focus of an international containment effort. In an earlier epidemic of another disease, vaccinators for smallpox used the Ring Method of vaccinating everyone around the person diagnosed with it. In resource-poor



**Figure 6.2.** Global polio vaccination efforts entail millions of each type of hundreds of artifacts, such as these coolers, vaccine vials, ink bottles, and ledger. The objects create and mediate relationships that are powerful expressions of disability, culture, and authority. Courtesy of Division of Medicine and Science, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

countries where polio remains active, vaccinators use a method based on National Immunization Days (NID). On National Immunization Day, workers fan out across the country with the goal of vaccinating every child under five years old. In January 2001, vaccinators in India vaccinated 150 million children, or about 6,000 children per second. Such an incredible feat relies upon numerous objects. Before the day, workers use banners, flyers, radio spots and other means to advertise the effort. They wear hats, vests and other NID-specific gear to mark themselves.

The necessary equipment includes vehicles and coolers to transport the frozen drops, vials of vaccine, tally books for writing down who was vaccinated and where, ink bottles for marking pinkie fingers with indelible ink, and candy rewards for the vaccinated children. In many places there are no street names or house numbers, so chalking the door helps others know that the home was visited. Transportation may be by camel, canoe, motorcycle, automobile, or bicycle. These relationships are established and mediated through artifacts: the vaccinators with UNICEF coolers, the vaccine in its vials marked with minute bits of information in several languages, and the recipients. Objects are central to this interaction and are the primary constituent of the relationships among these people. No vials of vaccine, no interaction.

But this is only part of the material record of polio. Traditional medical history presents people with disabilities as patients or cases. The successful search for the polio vaccine followed by its dissemination is the narrative core of these histories. Furthermore, in most historical accounts of polio, the children who got polio only make cameo appearances to create drama and to pull on the reader's heartstrings, heightening the urgency of the quest for a vaccine. Histories typically recount the science, politics, and economics of polio, ignoring its material culture. The narrative deepens and shifts when the material culture that accompanies the people

who had the disease is examined. For example, the inclusion of a Milwaukee torso brace or a Drinker iron lung moves the person with polio to the center of analysis by raising compelling questions about who was there. These questions and the people related to the artifacts remain unasked and invisible when historians rely only upon scientific reports, statistics, and policy. The limitation of the prose or print record makes it easy to ignore people other than as invocations of the stereotypical heroic overcomer or tragic victim. Every object is the result of human action and taking objects seriously entails asking questions about all the people related to them. The children who had polio actually get to grow up and have complex lives. Their associated objects have a significant impact over the course of the rest of their lives—from iron lungs and respirators and spinal tap needles in the acute phase to devices and accessories used in the rehabilitation phase, to adaptive objects and architecture for the postdisease phase. The influence of curb cuts, wheelchairs, kitchen equipment, universal design, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) reverberates throughout society. Material culture both helps transform a “case” into a person and provides deeper understanding of familiar events.

People come back into the story when attention is given to objects. With polio, the people who had it become as equally influential in the historical trajectory as health care providers, caseworkers, and scientists. The invigorated presence of people with disabilities, in turn, raises other issues, such as stereotypes, scapegoating, stigmatizing language, discrimination, patient rights, and state power.

The role of objects in activities of daily living and in the history of polio illustrates how objects have many lives, serve many purposes, and have a multitude of meanings attached to them. As possessions they extend the self out into the world. As things that are supervised, objects extend the authority of the state and usurp an individual’s ownership of his or her body. In polio, the vaccine is deployed and performed, with the arm of the state literally depositing it in the mouths of children. The children who had polio and then grew to adulthood use technology and wear objects.

## Things Everywhere

Just as disability is relevant to all aspects of history, its material culture is found everywhere. Material culture captures subtle and complicated historical relationships that are not always found in letters, journals, and monographs. Disability material culture is not limited to ADLs, rehabilitation, and medicine. It includes toys, fashion, food, clothing, souvenirs, and more. For example, every small town with a state hospital or asylum produced souvenir postcards of the facility as expressions of civic pride.<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 6.3.** In this postcard that demonstrates early twentieth-century civic pride, a group of medical staff members gather under the portico of a six-story building at the State Hospital for the Insane in Jacksonville, Illinois. Courtesy of Division of Medicine and Science, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

From the late nineteenth century until at least the mid-twentieth century, asylums were architectural showpieces and important employers. Thousands of postcards with images of them were printed, purchased, and sent. The postcards themselves had little information printed on them, beyond the name of the facility and the location of the brick or concrete mass. Objects such as souvenir postcards, plates, and spoons visually normalized institutionalization and simultaneously made it invisible. Asylums were tourist attractions, alongside natural stone arches, covered bridges, and the county courthouse. Visual acceptability and familiarity made whatever happened inside equally acceptable.

Different meanings are embedded in a lavender apron created in Santa Fe, New Mexico, by Kitchen Angels, a volunteer nonprofit organization similar to Meals on Wheels.<sup>21</sup> It was founded by a gay man and serves a range of clients, especially those with HIV and AIDS. As a generic kitchen apron, it is a gendered garment, one historically associated with women's work. Its lavender color and the organization it represents give it more overt sexuality than many other work garments. It is a disability garment in three registers. People with AIDS are protected from



**Figure 6.4.** This lavender apron from the Kitchen Angels in Santa Fe, New Mexico, simultaneously expresses disability, gender, sexuality, domesticity, and medical subjectivity. Courtesy of Division of Medicine and Science, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act. The agency where the apron is used serves the classic charity category of the shut-in, the invalid, the housebound, the handicapped. The apron, in a sense, is one of the instruments used in the treatment of “invalids.” Yet none of the historical shame or stigma of the “the invalid” is evident in the lively design of the apron or in the literature of the organization. Lastly, the apron is part of the community of objects related to food for PWA’s, people with AIDS, a word form borrowed from the people-first play book via the 1983 Denver Principles, a statement written by people with AIDS that lays out a platform of self-advocacy. This stance is similar to the position of the self-advocacy group People First, founded in 1974, which forcefully argues that its members are people first, not some designated impairment, and should speak for themselves on issues related to them. The apron, then, is a rich object with disability connections that are essential to its comprehension.

Another unlikely place to uncover disability is in the simple child’s swivel toy that allows the user to mix and match bodies.<sup>22</sup> The toy has several sides, each with



**Figure 6.5.** Disability is a useful category for analysis of toys, especially how toys teach children about what is culturally appropriate. Various animal bodies can be created with this swivel toy, which teaches that anomalous bodies are whimsical and perhaps humorous. Courtesy of the author.

the image of an animal in three segments. Picture books for children in which the reader flips the divided pages to make funny faces use the same premise and format. Simple didactic lessons about the natural order of things and normalcy are embedded here. The toy guides what goes with what so that trans-species matches are obviously aberrant and humorous. The toy can be read as reinforcing cultural beliefs about the undesirability of diversity in bodily difference. It also teaches children that crossing boundaries produces anomalies and that it is appropriate to laugh at the result.

Implicit in this toy and in many disability artifacts is the larger issue of eugenics and the pervasiveness of eugenic concepts in contemporary culture. According to the toy, there are correct and incorrect bodies. Parental monitoring of infant development is a similar expression of eugenic framing of bodies. Parents use baby books to plot a child's growth or his or her first words, head size, weight, and various other milestones.<sup>23</sup> Baby books are accepted as repositories of memory and employ the sentimentality of memory for eugenic purposes. Baby books are powerful eugenic records that reinforce an aspiration to "normalcy."

Figurations of correct and incorrect bodies are not just mapped onto actual human bodies; the design aesthetics of products can have eugenic foundations, as well.<sup>24</sup> Prolific and influential twentieth-century industrial designers such as Norman Bel Geddes, Raymond Loewy, and Henry Dreyfus embraced ideal types, efficiency, and concepts of hygienic form grounded in eugenics. Their 1930s streamline style can be understood as a reflection of an evolutionary and eugenic ideology. The hybrid field of Universal Design counters this aesthetic. Since the late 1960s, architects and product designers, primarily in the United States, have been creating designs that center on the concept of accessibility. The resulting barrier-free environments, consumer products, and software are statements of social justice.<sup>25</sup>

In summary, there are many benefits to analyzing disability history through its material culture. Ideas alone are not enough. Ideas are disseminated in concrete form. Said another way, knowledge does not exist outside of the material manifestation of it. Comprehension of a subject is grounded in both language and material literacy. For example, different aspects of illness come to the forefront when the information comes through material culture. With polio, nearly all of the written histories focus on the rivalry between the researchers Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin and the production of a vaccine. The focus is largely on the race for the vaccine and the egos of Salk and Sabin. The material record reveals a different story. It demonstrates that both vaccine methods are necessary. The incremental contributions of the numerous researchers who worked out the physical parts of the process have more significance, too. The Salk-Sabin rivalry becomes secondary, an interesting sideshow. Furthermore, objects demonstrate the significance of the people who contracted the disease and how their lives guided the unfolding of events. Just as a

historian of polio would be remiss in not examining the extant letters and papers of all the important scientists and policy makers, the omission of material culture produces an equally inadequate history. Lived inequalities produce unequal historical accounts. Material culture realigns the historical emphasis by restoring the agency and presence of those who did not leave archival evidence.

For most people, the lives of other people inhabit a place in the imagination—a mythic, nostalgic, or anxious place. This place in the imagination is easily accessed through objects. See or touch an iron lung, a hearing aid, or a panel of the AIDS Quilt. The response to the presence of the object propels the observer into the body and life of another person. Lastly, people come back into the narrative when attention is given to objects. Those who left few written records, the anonymous, the marginal, or poor, often left objects behind or used objects similar to ones that still exist. With historical context and the tools of material culture, we can touch those who are long gone and retrieve their histories; the gains for historians who use evidence from objects are unique and wide-ranging. In other words, when we pay attention to material culture in its historical context, we are able to understand people much better.

## Notes

1. The full history of most of these objects has yet to be written, and not many attempts have been made to explain the relationship of material culture to disability. For an overview, see Katherine Ott, “Disability and Disability Studies,” in *Material Culture in America: Understanding Everyday Life*, edited by Helen Sheumaker and Shirley Wajda (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 152–156.

2. As a museum curator, a significant amount of my attention is consumed with objects and their meaning. Over the years, Susan Burch has worked with me continuously in interpreting disability history through its material culture. Much of the analysis in this chapter either originated in or was sparked through conversation with her. The nature of our collaboration makes the pilfering of these ideas both fun and fully ethical.

3. See, for example, Susan Burch and Hanna Joyner, *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Leonard J. Davis, *Bending over Backwards: Essays on Disability and the Body* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum, eds., *“Defects”: Engendering the Modern Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); and Paul K. Longmore and Laurie Umansky, eds., *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

4. Social relations as object relations is the insight of Karl Marx. He explained this in “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof,” in Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (1865; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 1990).

5. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

6. For conceptualizations of this, see works such as Kim Nielson, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Bonnie G. Smith and Beth Hutchison, eds., *Gendering Disability* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); and James Trent Jr., *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

7. Good sources for understanding objects within spheres of exchange include Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63; Mary Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: Basic Books, 1979); Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things" in Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 64–91; Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

8. For a good discussion of value, see "Valued Possessions: The Worth of Things," chapter 2 of Prasad Boradkar, *Designing Things: A Critical Introduction to the Culture of Objects* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2010), 45–74.

9. See homemade key from Winnebago Hospital, Winnebago, Wisconsin, date and maker unknown, Collections of the Division of Medicine and Science, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

10. For more on this, see Katherine Ott, "The Sum of Its Parts: An Introduction to the History of Prosthetics," in *Artificial Parts and Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics*, edited by Katherine Ott, David Serlin, Stephen Mihm (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 1–42.

11. One of the best discussions of the comparative merits of language in relation to artifacts is John Kouwenhoven, "American Studies: Words or Things?," in *Material Culture Studies in America*, edited by Thomas Schlereth (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association of State and Local History, 1982), 79–92.

12. See Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.

13. Affect theory, actor network theory, and vital materialism are interdisciplinary and have proponents in the fields of political science, cultural studies, philosophy, and queer studies. See, for example, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Performativity, Pedagogy* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003). Scholars who connect disability and affect theory in their teaching and publications include Robert McRuer, Rachel Gorman, Mel Y. Chen, and Jasbir Puar. See, for example, Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012); and Jasbir Puar, "Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Debility, Capacity, and Affect," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2009): 161–172.

14. Assemblage is Jane Bennett's term. See her *Vibrant Matter*.

15. For the dynamics of staring and stigma, see Kenny Fries, *Staring Back: The Disability Experience from the Inside Out* (New York: Plume, 1997); David Hevey, *The Creatures Time*

*Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

16. For examples of ADLs, which were originally primarily used for evaluating the elderly, see M. P. Lawton and E. M. Brody, "Assessment of Older People: Self-Maintaining and Instrumental Activities of Daily Living," *Gerontologist* 9 (1969): 179–186.

17. The English, for example, partially justified subjugation of India because they had built the rail lines in that country, which they understood as clear signs of European racial superiority. For more on the connection of technology with superiority, see Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2006).

18. For more on design considerations related to disability, see Graham Pullin, *Design Meets Disability* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

19. For an overview of the history, scientific understanding, and relationship of polio to people with disabilities, see the online exhibit *Whatever Happened to Polio?*, [www.americanhistory.si.edu/polio](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/polio). This exhibit is also a good source for the material culture of disability.

20. For the history of tourism and souvenirs, see Marguerite Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); and Hal Rothman, ed., *The Culture of Tourism, the Tourism of Culture: Selling the Past to the Present in the American Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003). See also Christraud Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb, eds., *Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998).

21. Lavender fair apron, Kitchen Angels, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2010, Collections of the Division of Medicine and Science, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

22. Child's swivel toy, Sevi Krogufant ars edition, Italy, 1980s, collection of the author.

23. For more on baby images as eugenic instruments, see Shawn Michelle Smith, "Baby's Picture Is Always Perfect: Eugenics and the Reproduction of Whiteness in the Family Photograph Album," in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Vanessa Schwartz and Jeannene Przyblyski (New York: Routledge, 2004), 358–370.

24. For discussion of the streamline style and the role of industrial designers in the popular expression of eugenic aesthetics, see Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

25. For more on Universal Design, see Selwyn Goldsmith, *Designing for the Disabled: The New Paradigm* (New York: Architectural Press, 1997); Ronald Mace, Jim Mueller, and Molly Story, *The Universal Design File: Designing for People of All Ages and Abilities* (Raleigh, N.C.: Center for Universal Design, North Carolina State University, 1998).