

## Creative Works

### Stories Our Bodies Tell: The Phenomenology of Anecdotes, Comings Out, and Embodied Autoethnographies

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**Abstract:** The essay seeks to explore body-focused phenomenological writing in disability studies and film theory throughout publicly shared anecdotes, coming-out narratives, and embodied autoethnographies. Through the author's own bodily experiences in academia, particularly writing, attending conferences, and teaching, Greenberg bridges the gaps between the disciplines through an embodied autoethnographic phenomenological methodology inspired by film scholar Vivian Sobchack.

## Introduction

In this essay, I explore body-focused phenomenological writing in disability studies and film theory, through publicly shared anecdotes, coming-out narratives<sup>1</sup>, and embodied autoethnographies. Through my own experiences in academia, particularly in writing, attending conferences, and teaching, I explore the collaborative contribution of two disciplines, disability and film studies, to the articulation of the corporeal being in the world. In the following two sections, I carry on the important work of introducing film and disability scholarship to each other, through a 'coming out' methodology. As opposed to 'inspiration porn', meant to motivate temporarily able-bodied audiences, embodied 'coming out' narratives offer transformative responses and engagements. I argue that these experiences of the body inter-subjectively touch other bodies beyond cognitive perception, in other words, our bodies communicate with other bodies beyond our awareness. My intention is to gather these scholars around my writing table, while respecting and regarding their own bodily intentionality towards their own desks and chairs.

Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) is resting on my too small desk next to my laptop. The image on its cover, a wooden desk and chair superimposed on a blue sky, is prompting me to write these words. Throughout the book, Ahmed addresses her writing desk as well as those used by other philosophers. Ahmed's desk is experienced through her gendered and socialized body:

“It is here [the writing table] that I will gather my thoughts. It is here that I will write, and even write about writing. This book is written on different writing tables, which orient me in different ways or which come to “matter” as effects of different orientations. On the tables, different objects gather. Making a place feel home, or becoming at home in a space, is for me about being at my table. I think fondly of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. How important it is, especially for women, to claim that space, to take up that space through what one does with one's body. And so when I am at my table, I am also claiming that space, I am becoming a writer by

taking up that space” (p. 11).

Like Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, I, too, think about the authors of my favorite academic and fiction books; unlike Caulfield, however, I do not necessarily seek their ‘real life’ friendship. Rather, I imagine them sitting at their desks writing the words I am now reading. Specifically, I think about them orienting towards their chairs. Sometimes, when given enough clues, I can even sense them stretching their bones or stroking their lower back, like I do.

The politics of feminist and the queer practice of inserting oneself into a narrative was eloquently phrased by disability rights activists in the slogan: “Nothing about us without us.” First person narratives, anecdotes, and ‘coming out’ stories have long been popularized by literature and film, yet have only recently been accepted in academia, particularly by the discipline of anthropology, as autoethnographies. Feminist (Averett, 2009; Boylorn, 2013; Ettore, 2017; Griffin, 2012) and queer (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008, 2011) anthropologists claimed that multiple perspectives subvert the idea of a unified ‘truth’, and advocated for self-examination, due to its potential to describe social contexts from the margins. The vulnerability of the speaker/writer’s body, which is usually neglected in academia, is brought forth in various forms when exposing oneself to readers, conference participants, students, and colleagues. Whether the motivation is to critique, disrupt, reclaim, or rethink social orders, the common phenomenological effect of such writings is to transcend embodied vulnerability through intersubjectivity.

During the past decade, in which I have been engaged in film studies and disability studies, I encountered various uses of personal stories, anecdotes, and memories incorporated into research. The relative acceptance of subjective experiences as evidence in an academic study is more natural to disability studies than to film studies, arts and humanities, excluding some philosophical movements, and primarily phenomenology. Disability studies are rooted both in the social sciences and in the disability rights movement, which, I argue take personal experiences more seriously than do humanities and arts scholars. Disability studies scholars positioned in English and Literature departments, in particular, have long been familiar with the transformative powers of autobiographies and autoethnographies focused on disability.

In their book about autobiographies, Smith and Watson (2010) identify sixty autobiographic sub-genres. They include autosomatography/autopathography, characterized by personal narratives challenging stereotypes about people with disabilities, but describe them as unique form of autobiography. They cite Thomas Couser, who suggested that these narratives may also be referred to as “anti-pathologies”; in his experience, the motivation to write first-person narratives is to de-pathologize the self. Couser defined “autosomatography” as distinct from third-person narratives not written by people with disabilities themselves. First-person narratives critique social constructions of the disabled body and employ counter-narratives of survival and empowerment, thus redefining the individual body outside the social stigma and the medical discourse. Moreover, Couser suggests that there are diseases and disabilities that have inspired more autobiographic writing than others. Most prominent

are narratives about breast cancer, HIV/AIDS, deafness, and paralysis, and most recently, narratives about blindness, depression, and autism (Smith & Watson, 2010, pp. 261–262).

Disability studies scholars affiliated with the humanities have also used personal experiences of disability to various degrees in their research, emphasizing diverse embodiments. Tobin Siebers, for example, used first-person anecdotes as both evidence and as a platform for philosophical and social discussions. In his *Disability as Masquerade* (2004) Siebers shared his experience with airports, as a means to discuss ‘passing’, or in this case failing to ‘pass’ as disabled:

“In December 1999, I had an altercation at the San Francisco airport with a gatekeeper for Northwest Airlines, who demanded that I use a wheelchair if I wanted to claim the early-boarding option. He did not want to accept that I was disabled unless my status was validated by a highly visible prop like a wheelchair. [...] The incident was trivial in many ways, but I have now adopted the habit of exaggerating my limp whenever I board planes. My exaggeration is not always sufficient to render my disability visible gatekeepers still question me on occasion but I continue to use the strategy, despite the fact that it fills me with a sense of anxiety and bad faith, emotions that resonate with previous experiences in which doctors and nurses have accused me of false complaints, oversensitivity, and malingering” (p. 1).

‘Passing’ and non-passing, and other responses to ableist stares were also addressed by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Carrie Sandahl, and other prominent disability studies scholars. In her book *Staring: How We Look* (2009), Garland-Thomson shared her own and others’ bodily experiences of being stared at by children, and being asked about missing limbs. Sandahl (1991) used her memory of posing for a medical textbook as a child in her critique of the performativity of disability: “I submitted to being photographed, running my mother’s words over and over in my head, fighting the urge to lower my arms and cover my nakedness. I remember the male photographer’s silhouette behind the camera and how I was praised (‘good girl’) for my compliant performance. I was also told that my face would be concealed when the photos appeared in the textbook, so no one would know it was me. I came to understand that my defective body could be separated from ‘me,’ that my body was not really ‘me’” (p. 11). In recent writing, embodied experiences are even more apparent in disability studies scholars’ research such as Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (2002), Alison Kafer (2013), Ellen Samuels (2017), and others. In these works, the body becomes a compass for understanding diverse beings in the world.

In film theory, as in the humanities, it is unusual to write about a subjective experience, unless you are analyzing an aesthetic representation in a text. Prominent exclusions are phenomenological and affect film theories, which seek to explore spectatorship and spectators’ bodies, and thus involve personal perception. Linda Williams, for example, opens her seminal “Film Bodies” essay by explaining the motivation for the study through an anecdote about her son’s perception of horror films: “When my seven-year-old son and I go to the movies we often select from among categories of films that promise to be sensational, to

give our bodies an actual physical jolt. He calls these movies ‘gross’. My son and I agree that the fun of ‘gross’ movies is in their display of sensations that are on the edge of respectable. Where we disagree and where we as a culture often disagree, along lines of gender, age, or sexual orientation is in which movies are over the edge, too ‘gross’” (Williams, 1991, p. 2). Williams then uses the insight she gained from watching films with her son in the study of their possible effects on their differently gendered and aged bodies. Such anecdotes are rare in film theory; generally, film scholars address subjective experiences, self-representation, and bodily sensations only when describing their representation on screen, and not as self-experienced.

A prominent exception to this generalization is film scholar and phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack. Over decades of writing, Sobchack established a methodology of embodied autoethnographies. Her book, *The Address of the Eye* (1992) “...is often cited as the most rigorous of the film-phenomenology books, and indeed she does meticulously explore Merleau-Ponty’s work in particular...” (Branigan & Buckland, 2015, p. 354). In *What My Fingers Knew* (2004c) Sobchack explains the motivation for inscribing one’s body into the text: “Nearly every time I read a movie review in a newspaper or popular magazine, I am struck once again by the gap that exists between our actual *experience* of the cinema and the *theory* that we academic film scholars write to explain it - or, perhaps more aptly, to explain it away [...] Contemporary film theory, however, has generally elided both cinema’s sensual address and our own ‘corporeal-material being’ as film viewers until quite recently.” Sobchack’s body is an integral part of her experience of the film and her analysis of Jane Campion’s 1993 *The Piano*:

“Despite my ‘almost blindness,’ the ‘unrecognizable blur,’ the resistance of the image to my eyes, *my fingers knew what I was looking at* – and this in advance of the objective ‘reverse’ shot that followed and put those fingers in their ‘proper’ place (that is, where they could be objectively seen rather than subjectively looked through). [...] From the first (although I didn’t ‘know’ it until the second), my fingers *comprehended* that image, *grasped* it with a nearly imperceptible tingle of attention and anticipation and, off-screen, “felt themselves” as a potentiality in the subjective situation figured on-screen. And this before I *re-cognized* my carnal comprehension into the conscious thought: ‘Ah, those are fingers I am looking at’” (Sobchack, 2004c, p. 53).

As I will show in the second part of this paper, Sobchack teaches us that our bodies possess knowledge beyond our cognitive or intellectual comprehension. This concept is further explicated in her most autobiographic/autoethnographic writing, which focuses on living with a prosthetic leg. In her “Living a ‘Phantom Limb’: On the Phenomenology of Bodily Integrity” (2010); “A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality” (2004); and “Choreography for One, Two, and Three Legs: A Phenomenological Meditation in Movements” (2017); Sobchack offers a phenomenological autobiography of living with a disability, through which she articulates the corporeal and bodily experience of being in the world.

## Bodies, Tables, and Podiums, or: What Film Scholars Need to Learn from Disability Studies

In anthropology, autoethnographies are openly social and political. Reed-Danahay (1997) defines autoethnography as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. Autoethnography is both a method and a text, as is ethnography. Autoethnography is also more accessible and can be done by either an anthropologist who is doing ‘home’ or ‘native’ ethnography, or by a non-anthropologist/ethnographer. It can also be done by an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within a story of the social context in which it occurs (p. 9). In their *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (2015) Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis provide four main motivations to write an autoethnography: the first is to critique, make contributions to, and/or extend existing research and theory. The second is to embrace vulnerability as a way to understand emotions and improve social life. The third is to disrupt taboos, break silences, and reclaim lost and disregarded voices. The fourth is to make research accessible to multiple audiences (p. 36). While anthropology’s ethnographies use personal narratives to mobilize readers, the anecdotes and coming-out narratives seek to touch audiences and evoke reflexivity, a renewed awareness.

However unpopular personal narratives are in film studies research, they are in fact all around us in varying degrees: at national conferences, in classrooms, toilets, and in faculty lounges. We interact, share, and disclose subjective and sometimes intimate aspects of our lives. Moreover, we often use personal stories to convey complex messages, to declare our positions, publicly acknowledge what had been personal, and take responsibility for our actions. Mostly, we choose to do so willingly, as a means of communicating intimately, despite any possible negative effects or vulnerability. Last summer, a colleague organized a film conference that was open to the public, and invited me to present my research on short avant-garde animations about disability. Shortly after the premiere of a new web series, *Spectrums* (Ezra & Launer, 2017), about the Israeli trans\* community, he asked me to present my analysis of a few episodes instead, which would give him a chance to screen the series at a large cinemateque theater. This rather common interaction put me in a difficult position; at the time, I had not yet publicly ‘come out’ as trans\*. While it had always been my choice as to when, where, and to whom I came out, this situation meant that I had to choose between closeting myself or come out very publicly, at a time and place set by someone else. Also, refusing the offer would have meant excluding an important series from a conference wherein it deserved to be screened, discussed, and dare I say honored. Furthermore, refraining from presenting on trans\* issues when given the chance was something I perceived as not standing behind my community. This was an opportunity to educate; I simply could not have said no. I enjoyed watching and researching the series and its unique cinematic style, and its infinite possibilities of trans\* temporalities, and I enjoyed thinking about how it draws from both queer and crip (quip) themes. However, I was very anxious (mainly dysphoric) while writing; my thoughts were often scattered, and I was stressed about the deadline. When I presented, I was more nervous than I was the first time I ever presented at a conference. My voice and legs

were shaking, my palms were sweating, and I was not sure that anything I was saying was even coherent. However, only now that I am narrativizing this experience do I realize that it had become a ‘coming out’ story, one of many.

Coming out narratives appear in personal stories and anecdotes and are infrequently incorporated in academic publishing, and presented in classrooms and conferences. Although our subjective ways of being in the world find themselves in our theories, only a few people willingly and publicly acknowledge that fact, and what that way of being means for them. Public acknowledgements are performative, not only in the sense that they rely on former comings out, but also in provoking responses. Acknowledgements, direct declarations, as well as personal stories are noticed. And they are political tools, forcing visibility on what is otherwise erased. Coming out narratives are a part of the broader autoethnographic methodology. Anthropologist Tony E. Adams (2011) writes about his experiences with coming out: “There was the student who, the week after I came out to the class, wrote in a course paper that she likes women but refuses to talk about it with anyone, and the student who told me that his mother and father said he was “no longer their son” and kicked him out of their house. [...] In classrooms and my office, on the street, in restaurants and bars, and at festivals and church, I never know when I will hear struggles with the closet, coming out, and same-sex attraction” (p. 28). Adams focuses on what this performative declaration does to the ‘audience’, particularly their effects on people who share his identity. As these public acknowledgments provoke response, ethical questions of responsibility surface. Adams addresses privacy issues: “...these experiences require me to use great care: ethically, I must protect the privacy of these persons by masking or altering identifying characteristics such as circumstance, topics discussed, and/or race, gender, and name. Persons with same-sex attraction encounter many personal and social pressures; consequently their identities need to be protected, especially if their experiences are being used in ways they never may want or know” (ibid). However, in this essay, I attempt to explore the transformative effects of disclosures, and the responses that they invoke.

After attending several annual meetings of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), and sensing the lack of a conversation about disability studies’ place in it, I organized a panel to address this under-representation. Seeking to engage the more philosophy-inclined film scholars, I invited Prof. Laura U. Marks, well-known for her profound work on embodied aesthetics, phenomenology, and postcolonial theory, to respond to the panel and offer possible connections between film philosophy and crip theory. The panel, entitled *Crippling Film Theory: What Can We Learn about Spectatorship from Disability Studies?* sought to offer new theoretical approaches to cinematic spectatorship using disability studies and crip theory. Film theory has tended to privilege the seen over the heard and other bodily senses, although, as experienced spectators we know that “When we watch a film, all our senses are mobilized, and often, depending upon the particular solicitations of the film, ... our naturalized sensory hierarchy and habitual sensual economy are altered and rearranged” (Sobchack, 2000). The panel suggested that disability studies may offer new perspectives on rethinking spectatorship, and expand vision-centric film theories.

Kathleen McHugh's presentation focused on touching and tasting and further complicated cinema studies' theories of the gaze through Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's articulation of the stare. Allison R. G. Ross presented a queer and crip analysis of visual and mainstream visuality techniques. Specifically, she focused on how discourses which seek to "erase" or "correct" disabled or non-normative bodies or non-heteronormative sexual identities by rendering them "legible," "functional" or "cured," are challenged by works which problematize these discourses. (Rebecca Sanchez was supposed to make a presentation about the embodied language of Chaplin's work through critical deafness, but unfortunately could not attend.) I presented three short animated films that offer an antidote to the social organization of vision, and above all, to the supremacy attributed to vision in the experience of spectatorship. I suggested that what crip theory may teach film scholars, especially through accommodative forms, is that our differently-abled bodies go beyond traditional 'watching' and 'listening' in cinema.

This was also the first SCMS conference to include a land acknowledgement in the program, which the chairs were asked to read before presenting the panel. For those familiar with disability studies conferences, this is a standard presentation, followed by a disability statement. This new addition called attention to the absence of the disability statement. While it is now common knowledge that accessibility means ramps and toilets, even when everything is seemingly made accessible, the potential users of these are imagined to be solely attendees; no one seems to envision that speakers might be disabled. In a recent Feminist Film conference I presented, for example, the building, hall, and toilets were wheelchair accessible. However, the stage was an elevated structure with a podium, a table and five chairs with several steps leading to it. No presenters at that conference used wheelchairs, so the organizer and participants did not have to address this potential issue. Another feminist conference that I attended celebrating a feminist nongovernment organization's thirty years of activism resolved this problem creatively. Although the organizers called ahead to ensure that the building had accessible halls and toilets, the theater's representatives neglected to mention, or it simply did not occur to them as necessary to say, that the stage was not accessible. Only when the first presenter who uses a wheelchair was about to get to the stage did the organizer realize that it was inaccessible. In an activist context and nonacademic setting, the organizers asked everyone to leave the hall and move into the lobby where they reset the microphone, and brought out some chairs. What I imagine would have happened at the aforementioned academic feminist film conference given the same set of circumstances, is that they might have seated the presenter below the stage, thus rendering the speaker partially visible or entirely invisible to the audience. However, this disembodiment of the disabled body is but a radical case of disregard of the body. If we examine the podium, a central artifact in the conference stage design, for example, we find that it functions as an eraser or concealer of the body; it is meant to illuminate and enhance cognitive/intellectual perception. Designed to make it easier for the speaker to read notes, hold a glass of water, etc. and amplify the speaker's voice with and microphones, the modern podium does so effectively only for those who happen to fit standardized bodily norms.

In film studies, the arts, and humanities, we are not supposed to speak about our subjective perceptions nor the corporeal aspects of our bodies. We may use anecdotes, analyze bodies on screen and in narratives; but directly sharing our bodies' histories is not yet legitimate. I often see colleagues and friends sneaking out during fascinating discussions because their bodies physically ache from the sitting position. They each hide their need to stretch, lie down, walk, and move their bodies. Others, myself included, are overloaded by the enhanced sensory, intellectual, or social stimuli, and thus seek quiet dark spaces in which to relax. We meet at the line to the only accessible and gender-neutral toilets, and only there are we free to speak about our bodies. Public coming out narratives, sharing personal experiences, and body histories are more appreciated in disability studies, for the most part, than they are in film, arts and humanities, as noted. Critical examinations of the body, and the self in social contexts are the fundamentals of disability studies' philosophy and methodology.

What happened after the SCMS panel was yet another example of the transcendental effect of embodied coming-out narratives. In Laura U. Marks' very thorough response to the panel, she 'came out' as having mirror-touch synesthesia, a condition of sensual empathy. A week after the conference, I was teaching a class in which I presented Marks' book *The Skin of the Film* (2000). A student interrupted the conversation and described sensations similar to those shared by Marks herself and identified as mirror-touch synesthesia, although I never mentioned it nor was it in the book. Similarly, every time I teach Vivian Sobchack's *What My Fingers Knew* (2004), and screen Samantha Moore's animated documentary, *An Eyeful of Sound* (2010), at least one student comes out as having synesthesia. These experiences are evoked by sensual and body diversity and a conversation about them. Our bodies' knowledge engages with other bodies in ways beyond our intellectual perception.

Following my presentation and coming out at the panel at the Cinemateque that I mentioned, I met a former student who took my Body in Cinema class several years ago, also a trans\* person. He shared my part in his coming out narrative, through a memory of my then butch presence. He also remembered me recommending J. Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998), which was my own inspiration. The language in which our bodies spoke to each other's was not yet narrativized; however, it was inter-subjectively perceived beyond language. Sharing our bodies' histories in research, conferences, and classrooms evokes intersubjective responses beyond our awareness, because our bodies bear knowledge of their own. Disability studies' contribution to the disciplines of film, arts and humanities results in a renewed awareness of the different forms and shapes our bodies take in researching, writing, teaching, and interacting with the world. Disability studies forces us to acknowledge our diverse ways of reaching our writing desks, and to defy the admiration of disembodied podiums and the types of bodies that they accommodate.

### **Phenomenological Autobiography of Living with a Disability, or: What Disability Scholars Need to Learn from Film Scholars**

A decade after the conceptualization of the medical and social models in disability theory, Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson (2002) argued that these models created a

dichotomy between impairment, which is perceived as personal and embodied, and disability, which is defined as a social issue. They suggest that we let go of these models, and instead, focus on disability embodiment and disability as an identity. Such emphasis will enable a constant undermining of the dualism of impairment/disability, and proposes the investigation of the body as a new starting point for disability studies (pp. 22–28). Film scholar and phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack theorizes her embodied autobiography and complicates the assumed perception of a ‘fundamental philosophy.’ Sobchack’s writing may also be read within the embodiment model of disability studies, as she examines her body’s intentionality towards the world in various situations: sitting through epic historic films in *Surge and Splendor* (1990), her fingers, skin, nose, lips, tongue, and stomach in *What My Fingers Knew* (2000), and all other parts of her body in *The Address of the Eye* (1992). In her book, *Carnal Thoughts* (2004c), Sobchack thoroughly explores the phenomenology of living with a prosthetic leg.

Sobchack articulates her own concepts, methodology, and style, which derive from her embodied phenomenology. In three of her essays, Sobchack (2004c, 2010, 2017) addresses the phenomenology of living with a disability directly, without it being foreshadowed by film analysis, nor used as metaphor. Her methodology provides theoretic and often poetic frameworks for investigating disability through bodily autobiographies. Sobchack offers an “intimate laboratory” through which she theorizes the phenomenological autobiography of living with a disability. Rather than discuss the articles chronologically, I propose a phenomenological order, illuminating the multiplication of organs. The three essays propose a supposedly counter-intuitive experience of amputation resulting in gaining a phantom limb, a prosthetic, and a cane. Not only is ‘losing’ a leg not narrated as a tragedy in Sobchack’s philosophy, her body’s transformations and shifting intentionalities position the disabled body as closer to the renewed awareness that phenomenological philosophy strives to achieve.

In *Phantom Limb*, Sobchack creates a vocabulary to describe embodied experience through disability. Like many disability scholars, and a few film scholars, Sobchack sets the grounds of her field by means of an anecdote about an encounter with a child, who gazed at her:

Shortly after my amputation, at the supermarket on crutches, I was confronted by the curious gaze of a lone little girl, probably not much older than three. ‘Where’s your arm?’ she asked. ‘You mean leg’, I replied. She stared at the empty space beneath my skirt and persisted: ‘Where’s your arm?’ ‘You mean leg’, I said again, trying to think of an explanation that would be comprehensible to a toddler: ‘My leg got sick. I had to take it to the hospital.’ As she was pondering this, her mother appeared and the child pointed at me and asked, ‘Where’s her arm?’ Clearly embarrassed more by the social situation than by her child’s anatomical mistake, the mother nonetheless dealt with the supposed *gaucherie* of the former by apologizing for the latter. ‘I’m really sorry’, she said, ‘I broke my arm last year. It was in a cast for a while and must have made quite an impression on her.’ (Indeed!) (Sobchack, 2010, p. 55).

This anecdote serves as a springboard to discuss our limited knowledge of our own bodies. A similar anecdote about a child's stare, shared by an interviewee, was used by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson for a different theory: "[I]n the past I have responded quite unfairly to staring people. One tiny child once asked me where my leg was, and I (sort of fed up that day) looked down and FREAKED OUT! 'Oh my God!' I exclaimed, 'I had it this morning!' Now I simply tell them I was sick and the doctor took it off and wait to see if they have any other question" (Gerald-Thomson, 2009, p. 89). For Gerald-Thomson, 'starees' feel responsible for educating a child about tolerating human differences or indulging a child who does not yet know not to stare. For Sobchack, the gazer inter-subjectively orients our awareness of our bodies. The anecdote thus allows for both an embodied and a critical discussion – central to both film and disability scholars – about absence and excess, real and phantom. Furthermore, social movements are discovering that it is no longer possible to think in Cartesian/Kantian ways about the body and society. Social interaction is intercorporeal, as well as intersubjective (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, as cited in Hughes & Paterson, 1997, p. 340).

*Phantom Limb* focuses the phenomenon of the transforming body, or a phenomenology of becoming disabled. Sobchack's articulation of the corporeality of the phantom limb echoes disability studies scholar Ellen Samuels' embodied autoethnography in *Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time* (2017). Samuels uses her bodily history to explain crip time as broken time: "It requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world. [...] It insists that we listen to our bodyminds *so* closely, *so* attentively, in a culture that tells us to divide the two and push the body away from us while also pushing it beyond its limits. Crip time means listening to the broken languages of our bodies, translating them, honoring their words" (Samuels, 2017, np). Samuels and Sobchack seek new words to describe the body. Although striving to articulate a physical disability, Sobchack focuses on its invisible aspects the phantom/real sensations. Such narratives, concepts, and acknowledgements reinforce the claims made by people with invisible disabilities, most prominently the Mad Studies movement, but also people dealing with chronic pain and fatigue, who struggle to provide evidence of their experiences. These "intimate laboratories," as defined by Sobchack, further undermine present/absent, real/imaginary dichotomies that film and humanities scholars seek to challenge.

In "A Leg to Stand On" (2006), Sobchack addresses the materiality of disability and its lived aspects involving gender and class. The essay may be interpreted as aligned with feminist criticism of universal phenomenology, such as that posited by Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, and Sara Ahmed. They criticized the universalistic position and the basis of "the fundamental philosophy" presented by phenomenologists like Edmond Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Examining Merleau-Ponty's supposedly gender neutral and generalizing position in his later work about the body, Beata Strawaska (2006) argues that the problem in the universalistic approach is that it aims to present a wholesome theory of bodily experience based on the (male) norm or (male) standard (pp. 92–93). The relations between the disabled body and the social aspects of gender, class, and race have been thoroughly discussed by disability studies scholar Alison Kafer (2013). Kafer analyzes

various studies which suggest that people of color (POC) and underprivileged populations are treated more aggressively due to the inaccessibility of quality treatment for chronic illness. Kafer concludes, that ‘some futures (and some bodies) are more protected than others’ (p. 34).

However, Sobchack’s works dig to the base or root of embodiment, and focus on the corporeality of the flesh. Sobchack shares the ‘unsexy’ details of her prosthetic leg: “... my full (and rather ordinary) ‘AK’ leg cost no less than US \$10,000–\$15,000, since a top-of-the-line carbon fiber ‘BK’ prosthesis used for sports competition (with a special Flex-Foot its inventor also calls the “Cheetah Foot”) costs at least US \$20,000 per leg. Should I wish it (which I don’t), I could request that my HMO approve the purchase and fitting of the latest Bock ‘C-leg’ one in which microprocessors, strain gauges, angle detectors, hydraulics, and electronic valves ‘recreate the stability and step of a normal leg.’ [...] On the other hand (or leg?), the health maintenance organization (HMO) might refuse me not only because the “C-leg” costs US \$40,000–\$50,000 but also because I’m a woman of a certain age who is generally perceived as not needing to be so ‘well equipped’ as someone who is younger (and male)” (Sobchack, 2004b, p. 219). These details are meant to ground the material of a prosthetic, its mundane reality, and relations with her body. However, the phenomenological, social, and institutional relations discussed by Sobchack are also transformative: “...my consciousness, for example, altered at times by a heightened awareness not only of such things as the availability of ‘handicapped’ access and parking but also of the way in which city streets, although still the same objective size, have subjectively expanded in space and contracted in time so that responding to traffic lights now as I cross the street creates a heightened sense of peril and anxiety I never felt before my amputation” (pp. 219–220).

Sobchack describes prosthetics materially, and argues against using it [only] metaphorically or figuratively. “...somehow, somewhere, in all this far-reaching and interdisciplinary cultural work (and with the exception of disability studies), the literal and material ground of the metaphor has been largely forgotten, if not disavowed. That is, the primary context in which ‘the prosthetic’ functions literally rather than figuratively has been left behind as has the experience and agency of those who, like myself, actually use prostheses without feeling “posthuman” and who, moreover, are often startled to read of all the hidden powers their prostheses apparently exercise both in the world and in the imaginations of cultural theorists” (p. 208). However, even in disability studies, prosthetics may sometimes be used as metaphors, albeit with well-intended purposes such as in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000).

In “Choreography for One, Two, and Three Legs,” Sobchack further rejects the boundaries of the body parts and re-organizes concepts of embodiment through prosthetics, canes, and intersubjective relations with other bodies:

When the music slowed, my prosthetist came to my table and asked me to dance. My first reaction was, in no small part, terror. Not only was my body suffused with memories of dancing badly in public even before I had a prosthetic leg, but it was also stiffened by the fear of falling – or was it flying? ‘I can’t’, I said. But Steve would not

take ‘no’ for an answer. ‘You can’, he said. (Candoco, indeed!) And he pulled me up from the table, took my cane from my hand and hung it on my chair, and, putting my hand on his shoulder and his around my waist, he moved me into a space on the dance floor. ‘Listen to the music and trust me’, he said – and I realized that, unlike all those teenage boys whose lead I refused to follow, I could – and I felt myself relax, yield to the music and the rhythm and the improvisational give and take of the bodily movement we made together. I forgot to look at my feet. I forgot to think choreographically – that is, in specific terms of my individual steps and also ahead of them. And although, unlike Catherine Cole, I did not end this dance with a pirouette on one leg, for the moment I did displace focus on my bodily immanence to the transcendent ensemble of our movement and I really began to waltz (2007, p. 196).

Sobchack’s multiple legs – flesh and prosthetic, ‘real’ and phantom, canes and other people’s shoulders extend the body in a corporeal sense. This inherent intentionality towards other bodies conjures the feminist co-dependence with a crip ‘touch ethics.’

Also applying Merleau-Ponty’s writing about the intersections between senses and intersubjectivity, Janet Price and Margaritt Shildrick (2006) explore these concepts regarding a possible ‘touch ethics’. Merleau-Ponty’s famous example of the intertwining of senses was touching hands; the hand touches and is touched simultaneously. The touching hands model has already been thoroughly re-interpreted by feminist scholars, yet further exploration of the concept through disability studies offers an additional layer of meaning to corporeal experience. Price and Shildrick examine the touching hands anecdote by placing a person with a movement disability on the receiving end of the touch and a complete stranger on its giving end, or a person with a hearing or visual disability who uses touch to get attention, orientation, or recognition. Moreover, the clinical encounter between doctors and people with disabilities invokes intimate touch within an unequal power relationship (Price & Shildrick, 2002, p. 70). Despite the power relations invested in bodies touching, what phenomenological philosophy offers through the intersectionality of senses is that absolute mastery is not possible. Price and Shildrick ask further, “What does it mean to hold a hand that has temporarily lost sensation that cannot press back in return? Why does your own hand suddenly feel clumsy in its gestures?” (p. 72). Through the reversibility of touch, “...we are in a continual process of mutual reconstruction of our embodied selves.” Thus, the instability of the disabled body is an extreme instance of all bodies (ibid). Finally, Price and Shildrick conclude, “...if we fully accept both the phenomenological notion of the inseparability of bodyliness and being-in-the-world, and the postmodernist contention that not only the subject but the body itself is discursively constituted and maintained, then it is necessary to rethink what would actually make a difference to those with physical disabilities. The disintegrity and permeability of bodies, the fluctuations and reversibility of touch, the inconsistency of spatial and morphological awareness, the uncertainty of the future, are all features that may be experienced with particular force in the disabled body, but are by no means unique to it” (pp. 73–74). They suggest an ethics that acknowledges “...the constitutive relationship between the embodied subject and the world, the notion that our subjectivity consists in a becoming in

a world of others” (p. 63). What we can learn from feminist critics, they argue, is to replace exclusionary models with ideas of embodied subjectivity, “...which is actively and continuously produced through social interactions with other body-subjects.” However, these interactions are also enacted through our “bodies and their mutually constitutive effects one on another [...] the post-conventional perspective demands recognition that our sense of self, and how we orient ourselves to the world, is irrevocably tied up with the bodies of those around us” (Price & Shildrick, 2002, p. 63).

Film theoretician Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenology further complicates concepts and methods of investigating the human body, which are essential to both film theory and disability studies. Sharing her vocabulary, perception, and articulation of embodied autobiographies with disability studies’ scholars and students may provide a philosophical methodology stretching the limits of anthropologist autoethnographies. Moreover, by conceptualizing diverse embodiments, the universal premises of “the fundamental philosophy,” Sobchack’s embodied autoethnography offers a seat at a desk once imagined as accommodating only able-bodied-white-cis-men.

### **Toward Possible Conclusions**

Disability Studies scholar and anthropologist Amy Shuman (2012) talked in an interview about the democratic participation brought forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and questions about access that were consequently raised: “If we believe that a democracy brings everyone to the table, then literally how do you bring everyone to the table? Sometimes it’s a question of access to the table, being able to see, hear or understand what’s going on at the table. So people with intellectual disability are at the last frontier, because we don’t expect them to be at the table.” She concluded that it would be interesting for people to ask themselves “why they wouldn’t be interested in disability studies. What’s not relevant about it?” Seeking to raise these questions, I have brought film and disability scholars around my own table, hoping it accommodates their perceptions and allows room for their insights of being in the world.

Embodied autoethnographies offer both film and disability scholars a methodology to examine their bodies more intimately, and get reacquainted with the ways in which it surfaces in our writing. By focusing on our differently abled bodies while we read and write, teach, listen and speak, take to a podium at a conference, or what toilets we use on breaks, universalistic perceptions of being in the world are further challenged. These disability autoethnographies offer new means of rethinking our bodies, beyond socially constructed and policed dichotomies of mind/body, lack/excess, real/phantom, etc.. Embodied autobiographies remind us that our bodies do not merely orient our being in the world, but also determine our understanding of ‘being’ and the ‘world.’

Finally, practices of sharing our bodies’ histories, through anecdotes, coming out narratives, autobiographies, or autoethnographies, do not only expose an emotional vulnerability; rather they speak to other bodies in an intersubjective language beyond

cognitive comprehension. And while we still find limits in pursuing our intentionalities and orientations towards chairs, desks, podiums, stages, or simply toilets – the anecdotes, comings out, statements, and acknowledgements – stretch out to bodies in undermined, uncharted, and inexplicable ways.

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## Endnotes

1. I use ‘coming out’ narratives, borrowed from queer theory, to describe any form of declarations of one’s invisible identity (LGBTQI or invisible disabilities).



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