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Disability Studies and the Vancouver
Opera's Of Mice and Men

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Abstract

In *Disability Studies and the Vancouver Opera's Of Mice and Men*, the author analyzes disability representation, revision and erasure in John Steinbeck's novella, *Of Mice and Men*, Carlisle Floyd's opera score, and the Vancouver Opera's 2002 production. She argues that the attempt to rewrite the central character Lennie as merely a metaphor leaves a social and aesthetic gap that is underscored by a performer's attempt to embody the role.

Keywords: opera, John Steinbeck, Carlisle Floyd

Composer Carlisle Floyd, better known for *Susannah* (1955), a standard of contemporary opera repertoire, wrote the opera *Of Mice and Men* (1970) as a commission from Kurt Herbert Adler through the Ford Foundation commissioning program. Though Adler had asked for something of Steinbeck's, the choice to transform *Of Mice and Men* was Floyd's and that text, "of all Steinbeck's novels...was the only one that had not come up for discussion" with Adler and his staff (Floyd "The Creation" 18). I wrote the first version of this paper also as a commission from a campus discussion group who met prior to opera productions in Vancouver - though in my case the topic was assigned. The organizer asked me to discuss the upcoming Vancouver opera production of Floyd's *Of Mice and Men* in relation to disability studies.

For those unfamiliar with the plot, *Of Mice and Men* presents two itinerant workers trying to get by during the depression. They have had to flee their most recent positions because Lennie Small, a very large man with an intellectual disability, has misunderstood his own strength and assaulted a young woman. His friend, George Milton, has promised to take care of Lennie, and so the two rush to a new job with hopes of making enough money to buy a plot of land together and be able to live out their American dream. They try yet again to fit into another ranch hand community, but Lennie lets his strength get the better of him once more and this time inadvertently murders the boss's wife. Rather than surrender him to the authorities to be hung, George chooses to execute Lennie with a gun at close range, all the while pretending to encourage their dream of living off the land

together.

My oral presentation about the need to understand the complexities of disability representation and to think of Lennie as more than merely figurative met a polite and perhaps thoughtful silence. That is to say, nobody told me directly that they thought the topic of disability was irrelevant or frivolous, but nobody engaged with any of the points that I made either. The representative of the Vancouver opera company, who presented last, seemed most concerned that this group of potential patrons not be frightened off by the contemporary tonality of the opera and implored us to hear how "melodic" Lennie's opening aria is. It is melodic indeed, but the sense of threat that creeps into the accompaniment is, perhaps, the most clever innovation on Floyd's part to prepare the audience, almost cinematically, for the danger that Lennie will pose.

I left the colloquium frustrated that my efforts appeared wasted and was even more disappointed to overhear one attendee joke to a laughing, but hopefully uncomfortable colleague: "You want to talk about disability and literature, what about Caliban?" I still regret not having made my lurking presence known in order to ask what connections he perceived between Shakespeare's monster, Caliban, and Lennie. The comment seems, mostly, to dismiss the possibility of understanding Lennie as more than merely a metaphor for a depression-era, hopeless American dream.

Lennie as representative of a person with a disability was either dangerous or simply funny. However, I was considerably heartened when I later ran into another attendee who had subsequently seen the opera production. After some dismissal of the opera's rather thin score, he told me that he reckoned privileged patrons of the opera would leave the hall even more frightened of people with disabilities than they had been previous to the performance. He also noted the intense irony of the location of the theatre in a poor downtown area. The aestheticization of poverty and the attempt to aestheticize away disability struck a chord. To me, this demonstrates the powerful failure when a metaphor strains to be merely figurative and lived experience intervenes. Despite their best combined efforts to reduce him to a straightforward symbol, composer Carlisle Floyd and performer Ross Neill's Lennie appeared as an artistic presentation of a human being, disabled in a powerful, but somehow unrepresentable way.

Though it is rarely transcribed in historical accounts, disability appears throughout the Western literary tradition, if not literary criticism. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder explain in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, "disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (47). Consequently, disability scholars often turn to literary texts to discern social understandings of disability not apparent from other historiographical records.

However, though overtly "about" disability, Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937) has largely escaped notice in the emerging field of disability studies, likely because of its simple moral lesson that leaves little room for complex analysis. Perhaps the text could lead to a small debate over whether or not

the character of Lennie is a positive or a negative depiction of a person with a disability but, even if resolved, such a discussion does not stand to offer much to scholars committed to reconfiguring disability.

The novella does not provide an especially rich example of the place of disability in the cultural record, neither in the central character of Lennie nor in the peripheral figures of the "stoop-shouldered old man" Candy and the "crooked backed" Crooks (20, 21). The depictions encourage the reading of characters with disabilities as "opportunistic metaphors," as Mitchell and Snyder express it, an interpretation beyond which disability scholars aim to move. For these reasons, the novella has received only cursory mention within the key disability studies texts, in a list of works that exemplify what disability "lessons" "infuse U.S. Educational curricula, the contemporary literary canon, and film history" (167).

Further, in adapting the text not just for stage (as Steinbeck himself had done), but also for opera stage, Floyd openly and offensively chooses to avoid issues of disability, attempting to eliminate the possibility of reading Lennie as anything but a metaphor or a child-man. Even more so than the novella, this operatic version becomes a story about the death of the American dream rather than about the murder of a young woman and, consequently, the execution of a man with a disability.

For the initial presentation, I was asked to speak about the opera through the lens of disability studies, and doing so presented the challenge of reading lack of, or at least lacking, representation as significant. Nonetheless, both Steinbeck's novella and Floyd's opera offer veiled depictions of disability (the latter perhaps inadvertently) that, though not substantial, do speak to the larger cultural stakes always involved in disability representation. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson explains (in "The Beauty and the Freak," 2000) the new disability studies is as concerned with understanding cultural representation as with fathoming the lived experience of disability:

This new critical perspective conceptualizes disability as a representational system rather than a medical problem, a discursive construction rather than a personal misfortune or a bodily flaw, and a subject appropriate for wide-ranging cultural analysis within the humanities instead of an applied field within medicine, rehabilitation, or social work. ... Such an approach focuses its analysis, then, on how disability is imagined, specifically on the figures and narratives that comprise the cultural context in which we know ourselves and one another. (181)

In Steinbeck's text and, to a greater degree, in Floyd's, disability is virtually imagined away. Steinbeck's novella, and especially Floyd's revision, raise the question of what to do when disability is deliberately written out of a representational system leaving a gap that is both social and, I would argue, aesthetic. Further, the transformation from novella into opera complicates the attempted erasure of disability since it involves an increased reliance on the body of the performer to convey character as simply metaphor, which is Floyd's aim.

In rethinking the opera and the context of the response to

my original colloquium presentation, I contend that the stated attempt by Floyd to diminish the impact of disability is undercut by the inevitable intervention of a performer's body in any production of the opera. Further, the audience response to the uneasy fit of the able-bodied actor attempting to portray or deny the disability of a character is ultimately uncontrollable.

I propose that the plot that contains Lennie disappoints disability scholars precisely because it contains him. It fits into an all-too-familiar pattern of incurable disability leading to tragic yet justifiable death (conventional narrative options for characters with disabilities tend to be "cure" or "death" - think of Richard III, Tiny Tim, and Ahab). Steinbeck's descriptions of Lennie do fit stereotypes that are demeaning, dehumanizing, and denigrating. He is consistently described as similar to animals: "a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely" (2).

As the novella progresses, the comparisons to animals are increasingly sinister, rendering him not just animalistic, but also savage. He is described as "a terrier who doesn't want to bring a ball to its master" (9), as "strong as a bull" (24), and his movements are as silent "as a creeping bear moves" (110). But this is more than an observation that the problem with Steinbeck's novella is that the representation of disability is negative. Rather, with recourse to a degree of subtlety that Floyd later attempts to eradicate, Steinbeck draws on simile to preemptively exonerate George for his subsequent execution of Lennie, but the narrative structure that frames him leaves few other possibilities.

In conjunction and contrast with inhuman qualities, Steinbeck casts Lennie as childlike, an aspect upon which Floyd later capitalizes. In the novella, Lennie mimics the actions of his caretaker, George: "Lennie, who had been watching, imitated George exactly. He pushed himself back, drew up his knees, embraced them, looked over to George to see whether he had it just right. He pulled his hat down a little more over his eyes, the way George's hat was" (4).

He turns to George for help in confrontations that he has more than enough physical strength to handle, such as his first encounter with Curley: "Lennie's eyes were frightened. 'I don't want no trouble,' he said plaintively. 'Don't let him sock me, George'" (32). In mitigating Lennie's difference in order to maintain employment, George draws on Lennie's childlike qualities to make him seem less threatening, telling Slim, the leader of the ranch hands, "Sure he's jes' like a kid. There ain't no more harm in him than a kid neither, except he's so strong." (48).

This description encapsulates the paradoxical social construction of people with disabilities; in this case Lennie is cast as child-like yet dangerously strong. In her essay, "Martyred Mothers and Merciful Fathers: Exploring Disability and Motherhood in the Lives of Jerome Greenfield and Raymond Repouille," Janice Brockley explains that, in the 1930s,

Popular discussions of intellectual disability constructed it in two ways: The body could be seen as physically incompetent, a reflection of the mind's vacancy, or it could

become dangerously healthy, an exemplar of the body without a mind to control it. (294)

Lennie is cast as the latter, with the exception that through partnership with George, he does to some degree have a "mind to control" him.

Writing in the 1930s, Steinbeck clearly depicts Lennie's unusually strong body as needing George's mind for control; without George, Lennie would not know when to stop drinking, eating, and touching. When he is separated from George, he kills (rabbits, puppies, and a woman) demonstrating the "dangerous health" of his body. In *Narrative Prosthesis*, Mitchell and Snyder claim that "the effort to narrate disability's myriad deviations is an attempt to bring the body's unruliness under control" (6). Not only does Steinbeck resort to having George execute Lennie at the close of the novella to contain Lennie's threatening body, but George also draws on discourses of madness to evoke and revoke control in relation to Lennie. Mental illness receives different social censure from intellectual disability, but the distinction between the two is often blurred.

Early on, George takes offense when Slim calls Lennie "cuckoo" (43), saying "He ain't no cuckoo, ... He's dumb as hell, but he ain't crazy" and Lennie takes pride in George's defense of him, telling Curley's wife, when she says, "I think you're nuts," "No I ain't...George says I ain't." (98) But later when Lennie kills Curley's wife, George leans on Slim's previous assessment and pleads, "Couldn't we maybe bring him in an' they'll lock him up? He's nuts, Slim." (106) George eventually turns to the one explanation of Lennie's difference that he thinks will render Lennie controllable in people's eyes.

Of course, the reason that mental illness may be thought to be more socially acceptable than intellectual disability does not follow logically, since it is illogical that disability is thought to be threatening. However, the reasons for attempts at this distinction could be that mental illness is perceived to be potentially curable or at least treatable or less visible, a condition for which there is not just a medical but also a popular lexicon. In depicting a character with an intellectual disability as the embodiment of what cultural representations consistently attempt to control, Steinbeck hits on pervasive fears of disability as uncontrollable, separable from "normative" social interaction, and un-treatable.

Floyd's opera does not play on the discursive subtleties that the novella does, nor does it delve into the problem presented by Steinbeck of turning to psychiatric disability to avoid the issue of Lennie's less controllable intellectual disability. In an essay first published in *The Opera Journal* and reissued in the program for the Vancouver production, confidently entitled "The Creation," Carlisle Floyd explains his desire to rid Steinbeck's construction of any unnecessary elements:

The central story line, once exposed, was a very simple one; the pathetic fierce pursuit of a simple, if ultimately doomed, dream by two itinerant ranch workers, one of whom inadvertently obstructs the dream's fulfillment" (21).

Of course, there are many ways to "expose" Steinbeck's "central

story line": a feminist reader may consider the story to be about yet another murder of a seemingly promiscuous young woman; a queer studies scholar may read it as being about a coded companionship between two poor men during the depression; a disability studies scholar may consider it to celebrate the justification of euthanasia.

Floyd's agenda, however, is to eliminate the disability of Lennie because he finds it unappealing. He picks up on Steinbeck's wording of George's veiled threat: "Sure he's jes' like a kid. There ain't no more harm in him than a kid neither, except he's so strong" (48). However, rather than the figurative distance afforded Steinbeck, Floyd tries to literalize the childlike qualities of the character of Lennie.

In the opera, overt discursive references to Lennie's disability are absent. As Floyd himself puts it,

I wanted to de-emphasize the empty-eyed, slack-jawed conception of Lennie which is where some actors begin and end their portrayal of the role, and I felt that I had Steinbeck in my corner since he has George frequently refer to Lennie as being 'just a kid.' [sic] Approaching Lennie as a child, to my way of thinking, makes the character more interesting dramatically since it permits a much greater emotional range for the actor (and especially the composer) to exploit.

Whereas Steinbeck's wording makes clear that the reference to Lennie as a child is a comparison, marked by both "like" and "as," Floyd eliminates this distance, strangely because he claims that childhood rather than intellectual disability will give the character wider emotional scope. His revision not only replaces simile with metaphor, he also elevates the diction, replacing the slang "jes" with "just," for his esteemed art form, while still providing quotation marks. In addition, he adds the metaphor of the boxing ring, where he and Steinbeck are in the same "corner" in a fight presumably against the unpalatable representation of disability on stage.

Floyd's fear of disability characterization is further revealed in the remainder of his statement about his creative choices:

Also, to be perfectly honest, the prospect of writing music to characterize an idiot in a major role in a full-length opera stunned my imagination. What on earth would one do musically with almost total mental and emotional vacuity?
(19)

Such a statement momentarily stuns my critical faculties as well, but it is perhaps worth examining closely. These are the post-production words of an opera composer who claims to have deliberately set out to exploit, a word from which he does not shy, what disability offers an able-bodied artist of his considered magnitude. However, he feels that disability does not offer him even the figurative possibilities which abound in a long-standing literary tradition, and so he claims to choose a much less plausible yet, he presumes, more appealing character in the form of a child-man or child-animal.

According to Floyd, focussing on "a physical giant with the

self image, as stage director Frank Corsaro put it, of a small and rather helpless mouse" (he borrows someone else's figure of speech) adds mental and emotional substance to an otherwise bereft character. In this way, Floyd at best haplessly reduces Lennie to an opportunistic metaphor where a man with a disability is yoked to a giant child. Moreover, he seems to anticipate that audience members will ignore the tenor of the metaphor entirely and merely appreciate the supposed emotional range offered by the vehicle, "just a child."

In the published score, Floyd attempts to frame the opera for potential performers with a synopsis of his pared-down plot. The words are not meant to be sung, though they are approximately reproduced in the Vancouver Opera program. In those introductory sections, Floyd encapsulates the characterization of Lennie through similar description to that in the novella. For example, the synopsis of act one, scene 1 explains: "George and his slow-witted companion, Lennie, who has the physique of a giant and a child's mind, are in constant difficulty with their employers and the law because of Lennie's pathetic inability to stay out of trouble" (ix).

This relatively vague but still derogatory description of Lennie's disability, presents language that emulates not just epithets hurled at people with intellectual disabilities ("slow-witted"), but also insults for people not perceived to have a disability. In addition, the term "pathetic" implies that perhaps Lennie has the potential to evoke audience sympathy through his ineptitude. However, it is unclear whether that sympathy should be for Lennie or for those around him.

In another example, the written synopsis of act three, scene 1, in which Lennie murders "Curley's wife" (as she is only ever called in the opera score), tells readers (presumably potential performers) that Lennie "dimly realize[s]" what he has done (xi). These synopses add to the score a guide to interpreting Lennie as "slow-witted," "pathetic" and "dim," without the figurative cloaking that appears throughout the novella; that figurative cloaking is left to reappear in the performance.

Rather than the placid opening of the novella, the opera opens amid sirens with the threat of the police immediately apparent. Floyd expresses great pride at this revision: "the opening scene [...] in which the two men are escaping the police, provid[es] a dramatic thrust into the story which had been missing in the previous version" (21). Indeed the new opening does enhance what could be called the "drama" of the story, and it also increases the sense of threat that Lennie poses, and that Lennie faces, which is at odds to some degree with Floyd's characterization of Lennie as a child.

The first stage direction description of Lennie borrows, without quotation marks, from the novella, informing performers that Lennie "is a huge man, shapeless of face, with wide, sloping shoulders" (2). Similarly, the reader's introduction to Candy, in the stage directions opening act one, scene 2 of Floyd's opera, describes him as "a stoop-shouldered, grizzled old man with only a stump at the end of one arm" (41). Lennie and Candy's physical aberrance varies widely, but can be read, in each case, through the shoulders.

That is, Lennie is described above as having "wide, sloping shoulders," whereas Candy is "stoop-shouldered". In Narrative

Prosthesis, Mitchell and Snyder offer an interpretative key to this type of visual coding, writing in their case about disability on film:

Film narratives rely upon an audience's making connections between external 'flaws' and character motivations in a way that insists upon corporeal differences as laden with psychological and social implications. We refer to this production of disability as a visual indicator of fathomless motivations as film art's "new physiognomy." (96)

Like Lennie, his shoulders have no purposeful direction, gradually angling downward; they are strong but not upright. Like Candy, his shoulders bend under the strain of his great age. Audience members are meant to understand, from their shoulders, both Lennie and Candy's lack of direction and ability, as a type of visual short-hand that links exterior qualities to supposed interior deficits. Within the opera adaptation, this is the first clue that readers have that these two marginalized characters will be connected narratively and figuratively.

The character of Candy is emphasized in the opera version by the excision of the character of Crooks, whom Floyd leaves out because he claims "Steinbeck was attempting a social comment which, however timeless its validity might be, was nevertheless somehow dated in this particular treatment" (19). Presumably Floyd means that the ostracization of a "Negro stable buck" (73) is no longer appropriate given the context of the 1960s in which he was writing the opera. The consequent elision of the scene where the marginalized characters, Crooks, Candy, Lennie and Curley's wife, meet in Crooks's quarters leads to the elimination of an obvious conflation on Steinbeck's part of a number of forms of marginalization, on the basis of race, age, ability, and gender.

Curley's wife does not have a disability; being a woman in this plot appears to be enough marginalization on its own. However, Crooks is not merely the "Negro stable buck" (73), he is also a "cripple" with a "crooked spine" (73, 74). Further, Candy does not merely have a disability (marked by a prosthetic arm); he is also old. The connection between the old man and his old useless dog is glaring in Floyd's pared-down libretto when fellow stable-hand Slim informs Candy:

Your dog ain't no good to you no more an' he ain't no good to hisself.
He's damn near blind an' he can't half hear;
He's got no teeth an' he can't half eat.
He's old now an' he's sufferin'.
He's played out, Candy, he's just played out.
You'd do him a favor just to end his life. (69)

George, Lennie's friend and caregiver, fears precisely becoming "played out" like Candy's dog, and more importantly like Candy himself. As George later tells Slim, gesturing to Candy, "Sick and old in a bunk-house somewhere...ruptured and feeble, an' destitute...No! There's gotta be more" (98-99).

Ironically, George relies on Lennie's fantastic strength, and resultant ability to work extremely hard and make extra

money, to help him avoid the negative effects of the disability he fears might accompany growing old while poor. When Slim later convinces George to kill Lennie, he draws on the same rhetoric that justified the shooting of Candy's dog, "You'll do him a favor to end his life" (170), reinforcing the continuing connection between Lennie and animals, as well as the link between Candy and Lennie.

In *Bodily Charm*, Michael and Linda Hutcheon give opera credit for its capacity to unpack the complicated implications of disabled bodies on display, explaining:

Disability studies are showing us new ways of unpacking this less-than-appealing side of the Platonic legacy, but beginning in the nineteenth century, opera too began to reconsider and in part deconstruct that persistent theory by introducing the complicating ambiguities of the grotesque: as Hugo taught (and as many operatic composers and librettists learned from him), if the deformed were malign, it might well be because of society's cruel contempt and scorn, not because of any innate evil. (83)

Floyd avoids this legacy of Hugo almost entirely, and therefore the potential for opera to critique the social construction of disability, instead choosing to efface visible disability and at the same time exonerate Lennie from any kind of "innate evil." The Hutcheons claim, "it is harder to deny the body or repudiate the erotic in opera, with its recurring stories of love and death." (xvii). And yet, Floyd, in his attempt to rescue the character of Lennie from the jaws of disability, tries to deny the disabled body. However, he is thwarted by the need for an actor to fill the role which Floyd can really only take partial credit for fleshing out. The decision to portray Lennie as having a disability, then, is left to the performer, and the audience's reaction to that performer.

In the 2002 Vancouver production, the role of Lennie Small was played by Ross Neill, whose father had debuted the role in Europe when Neill was himself a child. In Vancouver, Neill appears largely to have succeeded in portraying Floyd's vision of Lennie, as reviewers praise his character for achieving a childlike depiction. Robert Jordan of the Vancouver Courier writes, "But Neill, with his rich, pliant tenor voice and huge physical presence, perfectly conveyed the child-within-a-man's body so integral to the essence of Lennie." Since Floyd's essay stating his intentions with regards to Lennie was published in the program, it is possible that Jordan was influenced by the composer's words into believing this childlike aspect was integral.

Janet Smith of the Georgia Straight concurs, "he has all the mannerisms of the man-child down, recoiling in the presence of strangers, jamming his fists into his pockets, averting his eyes to the ground." John Keillor's *Globe and Mail* review is more daring in its mention of Lennie's disability, but he still links that disability with childishness: "Tenor Ross Neill is Lennie, a mentally challenged man whose enormous strength makes his childlike handling of living things lethal." Further, it is Neill's success at capturing the childishness of the character that Keillor praises: "Baerg's role [George] as surrogate parent

remains solid throughout the opera, and Neill's portrayal of a giant with a child's mind is unnervingly resonant." Lloyd Dykk of the Vancouver Sun also praises Neill's childishness: "Ross Neill, who floated tones that reflected a child-like hope for a better life."

My own impressions of Ross Neill's attempt at a childish portrayal of Lennie are, I suppose, similar to the reviewers' if not as laden with praise. Certainly, his physical gestures attempted to imbue Lennie with childishness and exonerate him from a violent crime. His eyes coyly gazed stageward throughout, evoking a childish fear of rebuke from parent-like George. His continuing "jamming" of fists into his pockets was likely meant to be child-like; however, it became almost comical in connection with his repeated line, "somethin' soft with fur and I could stroke an' pet it like I love to do." And, judging from the titters around me, I was not the only one to find this double-edged.

At times, a strange sideways head gesture evoked the animalistic rendering of Lennie as sketched by Steinbeck, and Neill resembled a horse or perhaps stray dog stuck in a large man-child's body. The attempt by Neill to respect Floyd's attempt to elide disability in this opera version ultimately served only to highlight the failure of that effort. Where a depiction of a man with a disability may have enriched a relatively barren text, the caricature child man results in a bleakly humorous effort to deny disability.

In her essay about an adaptation of Richard III, entitled *Dave veut jouer Richard III*, Leanore Lieblein tackles the difficult issues raised by placing a person and / or character with a disability on stage. A character in that play, Celine (the actress who plays Lady Anne), "raises the ethical question of making a spectacle of deformity" (6). As Lieblein puts it, "Because for Dave deformity is not represented but lived, we are invited to imagine a version of Richard for whom deformity is not a metaphor but a product of a material body" (8).

As the new disability studies would have it, that "deformity" would be rendered disability as a product not of a material body, but as the result of social structures; however, the point Lieblein makes is crucial. In casting a character with a disability (the actor who plays Dave, Dave Richer, lives with cerebral palsy) as a character with a different disability, the play multiplies the depiction of disability, in strict opposition to Floyd's attempt. In the case of Ross Neill, who does not have a disability and does not try to play Lennie as having a disability, the metaphoric qualities of difference become so abstract as to be both socially and aesthetically barren.

The Vancouver Opera expressed great pride in themselves for taking on this hard-hitting, edgy opera and seem to feel they deserve credit for a social intervention that I would argue does not really occur in connection with Floyd's opera. The opera audience opens their program, a special edition of *Playboard Magazine*, to find the president of the Vancouver Opera Board of Directors making the one of the most abstract and ungrounded statements about the nature of artistic expression. Doris Bradstreet Daughney says, "Art allows us to explore our reality and helps us to articulate what we believe the truth to be" (5).

Her next statement, replete with objectionable disability

nomenclature, is amusing in its imprecise grammar that makes clear exactly whose reality is explored and, ultimately, who is included in the "we" of the preceding statement: "Of Mice and Men is an opera that explores how we take care of one another, especially those with special needs" (5). "Our reality" seems to be more akin to George's than to Lennie's. Presumably the character of Lennie represents a person with "special needs," and Daughney's statement seems to imply that it is "we" (people without special needs) who will help those like Lennie. This is more than a little strange in connection with an opera production in which Lennie is executed.

The remainder of Daughney's "Message from the President" drips with an us / them configuration, continuing "It [the opera production] comes at a time when our communities are struggling to understand how to make life rich and rewarding for those with disabilities". Again, this statement does not seem to consider that "our communities" could include communities of people with disabilities, let alone the notion that people with disabilities might already understand a number of ways in which life is "rich and rewarding."

Whatever the limits of artistic representation, an imaginative construction can comfortably encompass the ambivalence necessary to an adequate conceptualization of an othered body - one that could hold the physical and the social in unresolved tension. What is more, artistic texts can gain aesthetic strength from their very ability to remain between such poles.

In Narrative Prosthesis, Mitchell and Snyder discuss the ways in which narratives arise to compensate for othered bodies so that, as they put it, for critics "The effort is to make the prosthesis show, to flaunt its imperfect supplementation as illusion" (8). Floyd fails to aim for such ambivalence; in doing so, he loses aesthetic strength in an overly simplified and impossibly shallow characterization.

The Vancouver Opera took a risk in mounting a production of this contemporary opera. If the reaction to my colloquium presentation is any indication, they were right to be nervous about the upcoming production. The attempt to lessen the threat of a contemporary discordant composition as well as an unorthodox leading man appears, judging from reviews, to have more or less succeeded.

Though organizers had little chance of winning over traditional opera lovers, they may indeed have attracted a crowd composed of those, such as myself, who otherwise may not have attended such a lavish and overpriced spectacle. Like many who attended, I was transfixed by a fantastic production and mesmerized by a well-designed set that allowed the irony of the depicted poverty to suffuse a lavish hall. However, the treatment of disability was jarring to the point of diminishing not just a potential social lesson (one for which organizers strove desperately and with good intentions in the program and the community forum series) but also a potential aesthetic success.

The uncomfortable straining of Ross Neill as Lennie to play a man-child, a giant who loves to stroke bunnies in his pocket, clashed with the otherwise even treatment of 1930s migrant workers. The resulting performance could perhaps best be described as a parody, but whether it parodies the disabled body

or the attempt to deny such a body is as yet unclear.

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