“Secret Emotions”:
Disability in Public and
Melville’s The Confidence-Man

YOSHIAKI FURUI
Emory University

“He is quite worthy?” (NN CM 29).1 In Herman Melville’s The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade (1857), this query is posed in reference to Black Guinea, a “grotesque negro cripple” (NN CM 10) whose disability is suspected of being imposture. Who counts as worthy of sympathy and charity? Who counts as “disabled” in the first place? These are the questions that Melville’s ninth book asks through its representation of disabled characters. In recent years, disability studies scholarship has led critics to notice the cultural and historical significance of disability represented in Melville’s works.2 Among others, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s and Ellen Samuels’s analyses have contributed significantly to the understanding of The Confidence-Man’s treatment of disability.

Building on such developments, this essay interrogates The Confidence-Man’s engagement with disability by focusing on its situatedness in public space. Disabled bodies in the novel appear not in enclosed institutions, but in the open public space that is the riverboat Fidèle. As a number of critics have shown, disabled bodies in mid-nineteenth century America formed a contested site where claims to authenticity were systematically thrown into doubt, as disabled beggars were increasingly out on the street and city dwellers devoted themselves to charity practices. In her discussion on the presence of “the disability con” in The Confidence-Man, Samuels observes: “The disability con man . . . refuses to occupy any stable social role: he plays upon social categories of identity through manipulation and masquerade” (Samuels 63).3 In short, disability in public posed an interpretive conundrum for the urban spectators, challenging them to judge its authenticity and worthiness.

Illuminating in this context is Susan Schweik’s study The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public (2009), which charts the historical trajectory of legal segregation of disability in American public space that occurred in the wake of the Civil War: the so-called “ugly laws” legally prohibited people with physical disabilities from appearing in the public sphere. With the enforcement of the
first ugly law in 1867, disability began to vanish from American cityscapes. This year 1867 serves as a reference point for this essay. The Confidence-Man was on the cusp of a social transition from the “hypervisibility” (Schweik 79) to the invisibility of disability in public, a transformation that was accelerated by the ugly laws. This historical perspective allows us to see Melville’s prose as offering a critique of the very notion of disability, whose definitional contours in legal language were yet to be mapped out at the time of its composition, but were to be increasingly demarcated in the postbellum era and remain a much-contested issue in our time. But this essay is not meant to echo Schweik’s emphasis on the hypervisibility of disability in public in the antebellum era. Nor do I intend to reiterate Mitchell and Snyder’s insight that through its “warfare on ‘sciences of the surface,’” the novel “rejects outward appearances as indicative of anything within human beings . . . [and] continually undermines those who profess allegiance to a faith in correspondences between exteriors and interiors” (Mitchell and Snyder 43, 67). While their analysis focuses more on the former (“exteriors”) and leaves the latter unexplored, this essay will probe the “interiors” of the disabled. Through the examination of public space, language, and sympathy, I argue that at issue in The Confidence-Man is less the visible exteriority of disabled bodies than the hidden interiority—or what the narrator calls “secret emotions” (NN CM 11)—of those regarded as disabled.

Disability in Public: Its History

If we restrict our focus to physical disabilities, there appear four disabled characters in the novel: a deaf-mute (NN CM 3); Black Guinea, “a grotesque negro cripple” (10); a wooden-legged man (12); and Thomas Fry, a cripple with “paralyzed legs” (93). Black Guinea’s disability has frequently been the object of critical scrutiny primarily because of its questionable authenticity. After the wooden-legged man “began to croak out something about his deformity being a sham, got up for financial purposes” (12), the passengers aboard the Fidèle start to voice doubt concerning Black Guinea’s disability. They challenge him to provide “documentary proof,” something that disproves the claim that his disability is “a spurious one” (13).

Suspicions about the disabled body are not specific to The Confidence-Man; they reflect mid-nineteenth century social concerns with “professional beggars.” As Susan Ryan and others illuminate, the disabled body in the antebellum era was frequently the object of benevolence and charity, sentiments that were challenged by so-called “professional beggars” who were out on the street feigning disability (Ryan 688). Because of the increasing number of professional beggars, charity to the needy and the poor was “professionalized”
accordingly, in order to secure the certainty of disability and to relieve the benefactors’ misgivings that their donations might be lavished upon con men. Identifying worthiness formed a crucial part of charitable practices, and “charity workers retained the power to identify and investigate the needy” (688). In short, disability in public posed a vexing problem of interpretation for those willing to donate their charity at the time when *The Confidence-Man* was composed.

Conspicuously, the novel’s disabled characters appear in open public space, not in enclosed spaces or what Erving Goffman terms “total institutions,” such as asylums for the deaf and blind, almshouses, and other institutions that would have accommodated them in Melville’s day. This distinction is crucial: whereas the disabled identity in institutions is given and fixed by an authoritative agent, the presence of disabled bodies in public, without verification, raises the issue of their authenticity and legibility. As Ryan observes, “Disability, after all, could be faked, as could illness, hunger pains, and other sympathy-eliciting elements” (Ryan 686). Mitchell and Snyder note the move toward institutionalizing the disabled, which gained momentum after the passage of the 1834 New Poor Law (Mitchell and Snyder 40–41). At issue in *The Confidence-Man*, however, is what might be termed “uninstitutionalized disability.”

*The Confidence-Man* is historically anchored in the period when disability was highly visible: not only were institutions catering to the disabled in the public eye, but freak shows were extremely popular, and the number of professional beggars on the streets was growing. Disability in public, as it is thematized in this novel, was a historically contingent phenomenon and began to vanish especially after the Civil War. According to Schweik, in response to the growing number of beggars on the street, disability in public came to be regulated and criminalized in the wake of the Civil War, due to the passing of the first “ugly law” in 1867 in San Francisco. Section three of the law reads:

> Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares or public places in the City or County of San Francisco, shall not therein or thereon expose himself or herself to public view. (qtd. in Schweik 291)

Magnifying disability’s visible presence, this law seeks to remove it from public view. Following the San Francisco legislation, an intense wave of ugly laws swept across the nation (3). Segregation and elimination of disabled beggars in the era of the ugly laws were made possible by a confluence of medicinal, municipal, and legal authorities who sought to regulate and sanitize the public space.
With the shift in the status of disabled beggars from a hypervisible to an increasingly invisible existence, “almsgiving to beggars began to seem more and more unnecessary, and scenes of proving worthiness for aid promised to shift from the street to the offices of certifying doctors” (Schweik 79). What Schweik terms “theatres of disability” (137) were transferred from the public street to the juridical court where professional authorities sat to judge the authenticity of disability. Given this context, one can place *The Confidence-Man* at a historical threshold where disability in public was about to go through a radical transformation in American history, a transformation through which disabled bodies came to be legalized out of public view. Although disability in public in the era before the ugly laws already formed a much-contested issue in legal terms, it remained only one of the components constituting “the poor.” With the advent of the ugly laws, disability became the main and sole target of legal segregation. *The Confidence-Man* addressed this social milieu in which disability in public increasingly became a matter of legal and ideological concern.

**Public Space: The *Fidèle* as a Modern City**

In thinking further about disability in public, it behooves us to narrow down the meaning of “public space” as it pertains to the fictional world of *The Confidence-Man*. The complexity of public space in Melville’s work can be approached from three perspectives: urbanity, authority, and contingency.

First of all, the *Fidèle* bears a striking similarity to a burgeoning modern city in America. This novel famously begins with an emphasis on “strangers”: “The huge *Fidèle* still receives additional passengers in exchange for those that disembark; so that, though always full of strangers, she continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange” (NN CM 8). The porousness to the outside and the saturation with strangers described here metaphorize the riverboat into a modern city that ceaselessly welcomes “strangers,” whether they be foreign immigrants or those from other parts of America. Indeed, the narrator supports this reading when he writes that there are “natives of all sorts, and foreigners” (9) on the *Fidèle.* This urbanity of the ship actually has much to do with disability. Schweik points out the intimate link between growing urbanization and the rationale for the ugly laws in the postwar America: “Since most of the human beings whom one encounters in the city are strangers, city dwellers depended on abstract law to handle manners problems (Schweik 31).

This observation brings us to the second feature of the riverboat: unlike the post-war cities whose open spaces came to be increasingly regulated by
law, the pre-war *Fidèle* is marked by the lack of regulatory authority over public space. The *Fidèle*’s uniqueness consists in its absence of a single center of authority, a center that would determine rules aboard and the direction the ship should take. Quite unlike the other ships in Melville’s novels run by dogmatic captains (Ahab and Claret, among others), the *Fidèle* lacks a policing center. In a telling contrast with Ahab’s private cabin in *Moby-Dick*, the cabin in *The Confidence-Man* functions as a public space where a variety of ordinary passengers lounge (NN CM 52). The captain of the *Fidèle*, several mentions of his presence notwithstanding, never appears in the novel. The absence of regulatory authority becomes clearest when “a well-to-do gentleman” complains at the sight of Black Guinea, the “grotesque negro cripple”: “Why will the captain suffer these begging fellows on board?” (NN CM 28). In the decades following *The Confidence-Man*, ugly laws will fulfill this passenger’s desire for the policing agent that eliminates “unsightly beggars” (Schweik 5) from the public space.

Third and most important, this novel presents public space as contingent. In her analysis of *The Confidence-Man*, Jennifer Greiman clarifies how the notion of the “crowd” operates in this novel’s public space. The crowd in *The Confidence-Man*, she argues, is “contingent and temporary,” constantly being made, dissolved, and remade according to shifting situations (Greiman 198). She makes a compelling case that the advent of the deaf-mute, “a stranger in the extremest sense of the word,” creates the crowd: “While the crowd forms the man as increasingly, extremely strange, the strangeness of the man, in turn, forms the crowd, and the stranger and more singular he becomes under its scrutiny, the more the crowd itself comes to behave as a singular agent” (197). The relationship between the singular deaf-mute and the collective crowd is dialectical and mutually dependent: each constitutes the other through their differences.

The public space inhabited by this crowd proves just as contingent and temporary. Indeed, the *Fidèle* constantly fluctuates between the public and the private, obfuscating the boundary between the two. After the public display of Black Guinea’s begging, the novel shifts its perspective to “one of the side balconies astern” (NN CM 18), where “the man with the weed,” allegedly another confidence-man, seeks to elicit money from Henry Roberts, “the country merchant.” The man with the weed voices a desire to retreat into a private space: “I have something private and particular to say to you” (20). The narrator reports that “Mr. Roberts, good man, could but acquiesce, and the two having silently walked to a less public spot, the manner of the man with the weed suddenly assumed a seriousness almost painful” (20–21). After retreating, the man with the weed asks Roberts to loan him money and eventually succeeds in his
scheme. Almost any space on the Fidèle, a steamboat accommodating miscellaneous passengers, can become public or private depending on circumstances. If a crowd forms, as in the cases of the deaf-mute and Black Guinea, the space around these characters becomes public. If one steps outside this crowd, there emerges a private space. The scene with the man with the weed and Roberts demonstrates the shifting, porous line between public and private, indicating the contingency of the public space on the Fidèle.

For understanding disability in the public space of the Fidèle, a useful context is the exhibition of aberrant bodies in freak shows, a cultural phenomenon that gained immense popularity in mid-nineteenth century American cities. Melville’s narrator refers to two freaks, Calvin Edson (NN CM 78) and Chang and Eng (108), the then well-known performers displayed at P. T. Barnum’s American Museum. The narrator further mentions “a revolving Drummond light” (239), the famous light placed at the top of Barnum’s museum. The deaf-mute, the first disabled figure in this novel, appears before the public next to a description of a “mysterious impostor”: “As if it had been a theatre-bill, crowds were gathered about the announcement. . . . Pausing at this spot, the stranger so far succeeded in threading his way, as at last to plant himself just beside the placard” (NN CM 3–4). This juxtaposition of the “theatre-bill” and the deaf-mute bespeaks the novel’s thematic concern with the theatricality of disability and the implied linkage between disability in public and freak shows. In both cases, disabled bodies are displayed in public, raising questions about authenticity. Barnum’s “Museum,” despite the pseudo-scientific authority it claimed, was often associated with spuriousness (Harris 61–62; Reiss 143–58).

Despite the similarities between disability in public and freak shows, there exists an essential difference between the two: the presence of a mediating authority. In a reading of Melville’s first novel Typee, Leonard Cassuto reinterprets tattooed Typees as freaks and emphasizes the passivity imposed upon freaks by the narrator: “Tommo’s fear of losing control points to the freak’s passivity before the spiel of the carnival talker, who guides the spectator’s gaze and therefore controls the terms of the display.” This carnival talker, Cassuto argues, “creates the human oddity as a grotesque freak by instructing the audience on how to look at the exhibit” (Cassuto 241). Freaks on display unavoidably assume the attribute of passivity because they are not allowed to speak who they are; the “carnival talker” imposes their identity upon them, and the spectators are asked to be complicit in accepting this alleged identity. On the Fidèle, however, without any authoritative figure to guide scrutiny, disability confronts the passengers without authentication. Both Black Guinea’s and the deaf-mute’s disabilities are unauthorized: the deaf-mute appears with
“no badge of authority about him, but rather something quite the contrary” (NN CM 4) and Black Guinea is “widout massa” (10). Without “authority” and “master,” their disabled bodies drift in the ship’s public space as unidentified signifiers.

Language: The Narrator’s Naming Act

However, there is an implied presence of a mediator in the text who seeks to fix the identity of disability: the narrator. By naming disability, the narrator mediates between disability and the reader on the textual level. To repeat Cassuto’s phrase, the narrator “guides the spectator’s gaze and therefore controls the terms of the display.” It is only through the narrator’s language that the reader can discern the disabled bodies in The Confidence-Man.

The narrator appears before the reader first and foremost as a naming subject. The title of the first chapter reads: “A mute goes aboard a boat on the Mississippi” (NN CM 3). At first sight, there does not seem to be anything remarkable about this title. However, it begins to appear problematic when we notice that, strictly speaking, this character’s muteness is not something verifiable. While the narrator keeps calling him either “the mute” or “the deaf-mute,” the passengers on the Fidèle cannot so easily classify this “stranger.”

His advent on the Fidèle confounds the passengers by his utter unknowability: “From the shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wonderings of the crowd, it was plain that he was, in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger” (3). As the word “wonderings” makes clear, his presence is marked by unknowability and illegibility that challenge the spectators’ interpretive faculties.

Even after the passengers begin to suspect his muteness, this alleged disability works to confound rather than fix his identity, for it is taken for idiocy by the watching crowd: “Taking him for some strange kind of simpleton, harmless enough . . . they made no scruple to jostle him aside” (NN CM 4). His muteness is then implicitly conflated with lunacy: “To some observers, the singularity, if not lunacy, of the stranger was heightened by his muteness” (5). Further, Chapter 2, “Showing that many men have many minds,” begins with the enumeration of the nineteen passengers’ reactions to the presence of the deaf-mute. One passenger calls him “Moon-calf” (7), a nineteenth-century synonym for a person with cognitive disability. This lengthy listing of “the epitaphic comments, conflictingly spoken or thought, of a miscellaneous company” (7–8) neatly encapsulates the ways in which the deaf-mute’s identity eludes easy identification and also how physical and cognitive disabilities were understood—or misunderstood—in relation to each other. Despite this slipperiness of identity, the narrator seeks to domesticate the
unknowability and alterity of this stranger by according him a fixed designa-

tion as “the deaf-mute.”

The same is true of Black Guinea, though with more complexity. Despite
the uncertainty surrounding Black Guinea’s disability, the narrator keeps calling
him the “cripple.” Nowhere is the narrator’s rhetorical strategy more evident
than the opening passage of Chapter 3, where he gives a minute description:

In the forward part of the boat, not the least attractive object, for a time,
was a grotesque negro cripple, in tow-cloth attire and an old coal-sifter of a
tamborine in his hand, who, owing to something wrong about his legs, was,
in effect, cut down to the stature of a Newfoundland dog; his knotted black
fleece and good-natured, honest black face rubbing against the upper part
of people’s thighs as he made shift to shuffle about, making music, such as
it was, and raising a smile even from the gravest. It was curious to see him,
out of his very deformity, indigence, and houselessness, so cheerily endured,
raising mirth in some of that crowd, whose own purses, hearths, hearts, all
their possessions, sound limbs included, could not make gay. (NN CM 10)

The narrator’s loaded language here demands close analysis. First, the adjec-
tive “grotesque” conjoins Black Guinea’s racial blackness (“negro”) and dis-
\ability (“cripple”) with monstrosity. Given the antebellum era’s proclivity for
attributing disability to blacks as “a marker of hierarchical relations” (Bayn-
ton 34), the narrator’s conjoining of Black Guinea’s race and disability can be
seen as encouraging the reader’s belief in his disability. By portraying him as
“a Newfoundland dog,” the narrator works to combine disability, race, and
animality. Finally, in the last sentence the narrator reinforces the dichotomy
between Black Guinea as disabled and the spectators as able-bodied by calling
attention to Guinea’s “very deformity” and to the watching crowd’s “sound
limbs.” Thus, in this opening passage, the narrator thoroughly elaborates the
presentation of Black Guinea as a grotesque, bestial, and unsound disabled
figure, drawing several rigid lines between his disability and the able-bodied-
ness of the crowd. To recall Greiman’s argument here, it can be said that the
narrator creates the crowd for the reader by overtly highlighting the singular-
ity of Black Guinea and the collectivity of the crowd. The narrator feeds on
the crowd’s “desire to rely on the visible,” a desire which Mitchell and Snyder
argue “resides in our wish to superficially smooth over a world overrun with
upheavals and inconsistencies” (Mitchell and Snyder 67).

The narrator’s schematic presentation of Black Guinea and the spec-
tators proves deeply problematic. Despite his apparent emphasis on Black Guin-
ea’s disability, the narrator immediately proceeds to present a scene where the
wooden-legged man appears and Black Guinea’s disability is subsequently
thrown into question. The narrator’s schematic portrayal of Black Guinea runs
counter to the whole structure of this novel, which thematizes unstable identity and defies any easy understanding. Put differently, the narrator's linguistic presentation of Black Guinea is structurally deconstructed by the whole story, which, at the same time as the narrator seeks to anchor the character's identity, constantly unmoors it. The narrator himself could be another confidence-man, who seeks to deceive the reader into an easy assumption that visible, bodily indices can determine one's disabled identity. As John Bryant puts it, we the readers are “the potential dupes of a literary confidence game” (Bryant 234).

Melville’s meditation on language leads us to consider the cultural and social constructedness of disability, a fundamental premise of disability studies since its inception. For instance, Lennard Davis analyzes “the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (Davis 3), showing how normalcy and disability mutually sustain each other. Language constitutes one of the key factors in the construction of disability. How we talk about disability determines what disability is. Henri-Jacques Stiker discusses the social construction of disability by calling attention to the act of naming: “To name, designate, point out, is to make exist. . . . The institution of language is the primary social institution in which all the others are inscribed and, indeed, where they originate. . . . Language is an institution, in the double sense that it is socially established and that it arranges the social fact” (Stiker 153). Yet, as we have seen in the foregoing discussion, the power of language to fix identity is radically called into question in The Confidence-Man.

What Stiker terms the “institution of language” can be discussed more specifically in relation to the problem of law. Legal enforcement necessarily entails the definition of its target, demarcating the borders between what counts as lawful and unlawful by recourse to the definitional power of language. Schweik discusses the close interplay between legal language and disability at work in the ugly laws, by devoting a whole chapter to this issue (Ch.3, “The Law in Language”). Through her attention to the diction of ordinances, she illuminates the ways in which legal language determines how we see and understand disability. For example, she argues that “in the texts of some ugly or uglylike laws, the languages of freak and beggar, street and stage, overtly intertwine” (Schweik 101).

Schweik demonstrates the process through which freaks and the disabled became conflated into the same entity through legal language. Pointing out the “startling indeterminacy,” Schweik notes that, rather than determining what disability is, the law “might prove very useful as a way of foregrounding the inevitable ambiguity of the category of ‘disability’” (11). Similarly, the narrator’s language in The Confidence-Man demonstrates both its definitional power and the “inevitable ambiguity” it entails, at once deceiving the reader into a belief
that visual representation determines one’s disabled identity and debunking the limits of such correspondence.

“Secret Emotions”: The Interiority of the Disabled

The Confidence-Man’s scrutiny of disability does not end with its social constructedness, but pushes further into the hidden recesses of the disabled, problematizing the invisible aspect of the hypervisible presence of disability in public. A crucial case in point here is Thomas Fry, another disabled character with “paralyzed legs, stiff as icicles” (NN CM 93). Fry resembles Black Guinea in several ways: his legs are (supposedly) paralyzed, he begs charity on the strength of his disability, and the narrator calls him “the cripple” instead of his name “Thomas Fry.” Yet they differ in one crucial respect. While in Black Guinea’s case the authenticity of his physical disability figures prominently, in Fry’s case his disabled body is not even questioned: what matters is the authenticity of his storytelling.

Thomas Fry’s chapter, entitled “A soldier of fortune,” revolves around the issue of storytelling. At first, the “herb-doctor,” supposedly another confidence-man, takes Fry for a soldier who fought in the Mexican War and consequently became disabled. He accosts Fry by saying: “Mexico? Molino del Rey? Resaca de la Palma?” (NN CM 93). But Fry promptly denies his conjecture, instead offering a completely different story. According to Fry’s account, he was sent to a jail for his tangential involvement in “a political meeting” (95), though without any legitimate reason for the apprehension. The prolonged imprisonment eventually turned him into a cripple, for “the wet and the damp” in the prison struck into his bones. But when he seeks to elicit charity, Fry manipulates the story behind his disability: “Hardly anyone believes my story, and so to most I tell a different one.” Then he calls out to the passengers by pretending to be a soldier who fought in the Mexican War: “Sir, a shilling for Happy Tom, who fought at Buena Vista. Lady, something for General Scott’s soldier, crippled in both pins at glorious Contreras” (97). He succeeds in reaping “a pretty good harvest” (98). Crucial in this episode is that whether Fry is deemed worthy of the passengers’ sympathy and charity hinges upon the attractiveness and credibility of the story behind his disability, not his paralyzed legs. Paradoxically, his story stands privileged over his body, even though physical disability is supposed to be the crux of the issue.

What demands attention here is the sympathy that the herb-doctor consistently evinces toward Fry. Espying the cripple, the herb-doctor accosts Fry “sympathetically” (NN CM 93). Even after discovering Fry’s fabrication of the story to gull the passengers, the herb-doctor’s support remains unshaken.
Witnessing Fry's hoax, “a prim-looking stranger” denounces the act by calling him “rascal.” Yet the herb-doctor eagerly defends Fry's lie by insisting that “[t]he vice of this unfortunate is pardonable.” Then he continues: “Though the inglorious lock-jaw of his knee-pans in a wet dungeon is a far more pitiable ill than to have been crippled at glorious Contreras, yet he is of opinion that this lighter and false ill shall attract, while the heavier and real one might repel” (97). Most remarkable in Fry's chapter is that the herb-doctor remains sympathetic throughout, showing consistency if only for a short period, an attribute most inconsistent with the confidence-man’s nature. His sympathy is directed less toward Fry's physical disability than toward the general circumstances that forced him to pretend to be a crippled soldier to make a living. While the “prim-looking stranger” unsympathetically focuses his attention on Fry's falsified story, the herb-doctor directs attention to the marginalization that Fry suffers, a social exclusion that, in the herb-doctor's view, pardons Fry's telling a lie.

Strictly speaking, Fry's disability, just like Black Guinea's, is not verifiable due to the lack of any authority or document that proves its authenticity. Nevertheless, there is ample reason to believe that he is indeed disabled; otherwise he would not seek the herb-doctor's medicine so desperately: “Stay, stay! Sure it will do me good?” ‘Possibly, possibly; no harm in trying. Good-bye.’ ‘Stay, stay; give me three more boxes, and here's the money” (NN CM 99). Indeed, “it appears very likely that the soldier of fortune's disability is ‘real’” (Samuels 67). Yet, as Samuels’ bracketing of the word “real” implies, this novel structurally renders futile such an effort to make a distinction between “real” and “fake” disabilities. The distance that seems to lie between Fry and Black Guinea collapses when the herb-doctor diagnoses the former's paralyzed legs: “Let me examine you,” bending down; 'ah, I see, I see; much such a case as the negro's. . . . Well, his case was a little something like yours” (99). This diagnosis compels us to ask if they are really similar cases, and if so, in what ways.

To consider this question, it is necessary to reexamine Black Guinea's case. In his search for someone who can verify Black Guinea's disability, “the young clergyman” encounters “the man in gray,” a man whom Black Guinea cites as one of those capable of proving his disability. Finally locating the much-sought person, the clergyman expresses his great relief: “Then you do really know him, and he is quite worthy? It relieves me to hear it—much relieves me” (NN CM 29; italics added). As we have seen earlier, the worthiness or unworthiness of the recipient of charity became a crucial legal issue in the mid-nineteenth century. The clergyman's utterance above typifies the criteria used both by general public and authorities for deciding the worthiness of the needy and the poor: if a certain person is truly disabled, then that person is considered to be worthy of charity and public support. If not, he or she is considered to be “unworthy.”
On the surface, the clergyman seems to be a charitable person: he shows great eagerness to verify Black Guinea's disability, while other passengers uncritically accept the wooden-legged man's denunciation and dismiss Black Guinea's disability as a sham. But the clergyman's act is equally driven by an exclusionary logic that seeks to sift out the worthy and the unworthy, the “real” disabled and the “fake” disabled. As the clergyman's utterance indicates, the idea of “disability” works to exclude the non-disabled from the purview of sympathy and charity that are accorded to the disabled.

Crucially in this context, the narrator expresses sympathy toward Black Guinea not for his physical disability, but for the present circumstance in which Black Guinea finds himself as a sham cripple:

To be the subject of alms-giving is trying, and to feel in duty bound to appear cheerfully grateful under the trial, must be still more so; but whatever his secret emotions, he swallowed them, while still retaining each copper this side the esophagus. And nearly always he grinned, and only once or twice did he wince, which was when certain coins, tossed by more playful almoners came inconveniently nigh to his teeth, an accident whose unwelcomeness was not unedged by the circumstance that the pennies thus thrown proved buttons. (NN CM 11–12)

Nowhere in the text does the narrator express his emotion toward the characters more emphatically than here. While the passengers readily turn Black Guinea into an animal-like figure devoid of humanity and into a mere object of a “game of charity” (12), the narrator's eyes go deeper than Black Guinea's visible body, inquiring into his “secret emotions.” As we have seen earlier, in his initial presentation of Black Guinea to the reader, the narrator persistently calls attention to the exterior indices of Black Guinea's body. Because of that hyperbolic gesture, the shift in the narrator's focus from Black Guinea's exteriority to his interiority becomes all the more pronounced. A similar shift is also detectable in Fry's case, when he privately confides to the herb-doctor the harrowing story behind his paralyzed legs while peddling the false account for the public audience on the *Fidèle*. Despite its overt situatedness in public space, then, the novel's treatment of disability in public is, paradoxically, better articulated in the private realm of the “disabled” characters. *The Confidence-Man*, while explicitly treating the “hypervisibility” (Schweik 79) of disability in public, actually foregrounds and problematizes its invisible aspect.

What must be emphasized here, however, is that Black Guinea’s “secret emotions” are not fully revealed to the reader. Just like the deaf-mute who “never becomes a speaking subject” (Samules 70), Black Guinea is equally silent in this “trying” scene. He “swallowed” his emotions. His secret emotions seem to be only fleetingly revealed through his “wince,” when the coins strike...
his face. There are several ways of interpreting this wince. He might be wincing at the humiliation of being pelted by the crowd or at the recognition that some of the supposed coins are actually buttons. But his facial expression also eludes any definite interpretation because, in this novel which keeps destabilizing the correspondence between what appears and what is, the wince might be another theatrical performance by the confidence-man. Thus the private, interior space of Black Guinea is ultimately left inscrutable and unreachable, in a way that resonates with Bartleby’s enigmatic interiority in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853). In the same vein, we can also recall Babo in “Benito Cereno” (1855)—another black character—whose inscrutability derives not only from “that hive of subtlety” but also from his utter silence: “Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound. . . . His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words” (NN PT 116). Rather than representing Black Guinea’s secret emotions, The Confidence-Man indexes his interiority, highlighting both its presence and unknowability at once. This unknowability, however, does not indicate nihilism. Melville urges readers to suspend their judgment and to keep inquiring into “secret emotions” of those regarded as disabled and the question of who counts as worthy of sympathy, who counts as “disabled.” This urge for suspension befits a novel that ends open-endedly: “Something further may follow of this Masquerade” (NN CM 251).

Melville’s The Confidence-Man interrogates the problematics of disability in public, specifically by countering his era’s efforts to render invisible its hypervisible bodily presences, a tendency that will culminate in legal segregation a decade later. While situating “disabled” bodies in the open public space, the novel calls into question disabled identity in visual terms, thereby insisting on the inscrutable interiority of the disabled. By doing so, the novel urges us to rethink the boundaries between the disabled and the non-disabled, the worthy and the unworthy. Going back to the question with which this essay began—”He is quite worthy?”—we find that the novel does not offer a definitive answer; rather, by gesturing toward the presence of “secret emotions,” it tacitly invites readers to penetrate the visible into the invisible and to keep questioning those boundaries. The novel resists easily dissolving the alterity of those regarded as disabled into a knowable and categorizable entity, instead keeping this very alterity at bay.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Professor Benjamin Reiss for his constructive comments on an earlier draft of this article.
2 As a salient example of such an effort, the 2006 issue of Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies featured a topic entitled “Melville and Disability,” to which Mitchell & Snyder and Samuels contributed their essays.
A considerable body of criticism has accumulated around this problem of identity in The Confidence-Man, a question that resonates across the pages of this novel. As Peter J. Bellis observes, “Again and again, Melville’s dialogues reveal the unreliability of any possible ‘evidence’ of identity, whether physical or verbal” (Bellis 550).

Norsworthy also notes that in the late 40s, because of the annoyance of multiplied beggars, there arose a heated discussion over “the issue of public vs. private charity” (Norsworthy 395). For a more extended discussion on the problematic relation between disability and charity in The Confidence-Man, see Mitchell and Snyder 37–68.

As many scholars have shown, disability in public was already an ongoing problem in the antebellum era, though less conspicuously than in the succeeding era of the ugly laws. Disability became a legal issue in the form of poor laws when it involved poverty and inability to work. The distinction between “outdoor relief” (giving material support to social dependents at home) and “indoor relief” (institutionalizing the poor in almshouses or workhouses) formed a contested issue through much of the nineteenth century. See Bourque 191; Trattner 58.

For an extended discussion on the Fidèle as an urban space, see Kelley 242–66.

In a similar vein, Greiman notes the connection between Black Guinea and Barnum. See Greiman 204.

For another important perspective on the mediating presence in freak shows, see Bogdan 26–29.

Samuels explores “questions of truth and the efficacy of language” by focusing on the herb-doctor’s engagements with the “sick man” and the “invalid Titan” in chapters 16 and 17 (Samuels 75–77).

The passengers’ comments in this scene have received ample critical attention. See Samuels 68–69; Mitchell and Snyder 47–50. My focus is not on how the passengers understand the deaf-mute, but on how the narrator manipulates the reader’s understanding through his narratorial ploy.

Cecelia Tichi also calls attention to the problem of communication and language in Melville’s novel. See Tichi 651–55. For another important discussion of the narrator’s use of language, see Bryant’s Melville and Repose, especially “Melville’s Comedy of Doubt” (230–43).

Black Guinea’s case is more complex than the deaf-mute for the name “Black Guinea” is not this character’s genuine name. Asked his name, Black Guinea answers: “Der Black Guinea dey calls me, sar” (NN CM 10). Even when the narrator chooses this name instead of the “cripple,” he necessarily draws the reader’s attention to Black Guinea’s racial identity, which is as unascertainable as his physical disability. His “name,” whether Black Guinea or the cripple, indelibly marks his otherness.

We can further broaden the scope of argument by adding Pip in Moby-Dick (1851) to the list of black disabled characters in Melville’s works. In Pip’s case, however, the issue is his mental disability because he goes “mad” after having narrowly escaped being drowned in the sea.

Samuels also notes that “Black Guinea, while perceived as black, is described in racially-charged animal-like terms” (Samuels 71). The conflation of disability and animality gestures toward the narrator’s investment in the rhetoric of freak shows. See Garland-Thomson’s discussion of Julia Pastrana, a popular freak called “somewhat between an human and an ourang-outang” (Garland-Thomson 132: 2003).


Works Cited


A JOURNAL OF MELVILLE STUDIES


