

Acts of Conspicuous Compassion: Performance Culture and American Charity Practices by Sheila C. Moeschen. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2013, 224 pp. ISBN 978-0-472-11886-1 (hbk)

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In this book, Sheila Moeschen asks and answers the question: “What is at stake, and for whom, in the cultural ritual of charity?” (p.3). She examines what we can understand about how disabled people and disability are ideologically constructed in society, through the politics of charitable sentiment and charity practices. Moeschen develops the argument that the notion of the American citizen is intimately tied to ideals of morality, and particularly, to the practice of organized benevolence (or charity) as a civic duty to act to alleviate the pain and suffering of others. Moeschen explains that although she uses the concepts of benevolence and charity interchangeably in the book, to denote a “fellow feeling” that enables us to understand the circumstances of another both emotionally and cognitively, she differentiates them from volunteerism and philanthropy. Volunteerism and philanthropy are part of the performance of charity that serves to express those fellow feelings, and reproduce them as morally necessary, and as a sign of morality. Moeschen analyzes the historical and political contexts that have constructed volunteerism and philanthropy as mass charity practices through which disability and disabled people have been marked as socially and culturally legible through being the recipients of charity. She also examines how this marking of disabled people as worthy of charity simultaneously marks them as forfeiting their personhood and citizenship, by polarizing disabled and nondisabled people within the charity relationship. However, Moeschen also proposes that this polarization has nonetheless allowed disabled people to challenge the perceptions and beliefs about disabled people as lacking autonomy and agency, through their role in the public

performances of disability in charity practices. More specifically, she locates her analysis within a critical disability scholarship that views disability as identity-formation, that is, disability as an identity, one which is recognizable collectively, culturally legible, and politically significant for both disabled people and mainstream society.

Moeschen examines how disability is deployed in charity practices to capitalize on and reproduce an ideological system that supports normative ideals about the bodies of citizens and the body politic, via the analysis of four major historical moments in American charity practices: (a) the reforms in the education of Deaf and blind people at the end of the 19th century; (b) the fight against polio between 1934-1945 through the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis' (NFIP) association with President Roosevelt; (c) the Jerry Lewis telethons for the Muscular Dystrophy Association from the mid 1950's to 2010; and (d) the present-day reality television show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, hosted by Ty Pennington.

In the first chapter, *Dramatizing Distress*, Moeschen demonstrates that the development of charitable sentiments was heralded by the Second Great Awakening, a protestant revival movement from 1790 to 1830. It had far-reaching effects, especially in the notion that salvation was a question of individual choice, and in the rise of reform movements it led. One of those reformers was Henry Gallaudet, who was dedicated to educating Deaf and blind children to become productive members of society. Gallaudet used performances by Deaf and blind students to showcase their talents and the skills they had learned. A further aspect of 19th century reform movements noted by Moeschen was the inroads that sentimentalism made in American society, supporting the development of "fellow feelings" in the citizenry. This took place most notably through popular plays, such as "affliction dramas," in which the main character was morally pure and endured hardships testing their purity and innocence, so as to elicit sympathy and pity in the

audience. Main characters were often disabled women, usually Deaf or blind. Deafness and blindness were presented as undeserved “afflictions,” granting Deaf and blind people a special link to God. This re-framing of disability, according to Moeschén, served to offer a counter-narrative to the belief that disabled people were abominations and abandoned by God.

Sentimentalism and reformist movements first established disabled people as part of the deserving poor. The popularity of “affliction dramas” and public performances by Deaf and blind students constituted charitable sentiment as a civic moral value, and charity as a publicly performed act of organized benevolence.

In the second chapter, Moeschén examines the NFIP’s fundraising and awareness campaign that took place through beauty pageants, shows, and the President’s Birthday Balls. By associating themselves with President Roosevelt, as a prominent and successful survivor of polio, the NFIP instituted charity as an American nation-building exercise, one intimately linked to patriotism.

Polio was an epidemic that affected people of all classes, races, ethnicities, and genders, and once it was established that poverty was not a condition of its spread, or at least that affluence could not protect against it, efforts to mobilize the population and secure funds to fight polio went underway. The President’s Birthday Balls were fundraising parties held on Roosevelt’s birthday, the first of which was a marketing ploy to raise money for the treatment facility Roosevelt supported and used, Warm Springs. It was held at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York and was a lavish dinner party with patriotism-themed performances and pageants. Communities and churches throughout the United States were also encouraged to stage their own President’s Balls, as fundraising efforts in the “war on polio.” I found of particular interest how children (disabled, polio-affected, and nondisabled) were used in fundraising efforts by the

March of Dimes. Moeschen demonstrates how the public pageants and parties, alongside a Presidential endorsement, changed the tone and raised the profile of charity fundraising, opening opportunities for musicians and movie stars to become public supporters of charitable causes.

Moeschen's discussion of the proliferation of public spectacles of disability in charity fundraising continues in the following two chapters. In the chapter on the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) telethon, *Wheelchairs and One-Liners: Televising Need in the Charity Telethon*, she offers a detailed breakdown of the history of the telethon. It offers not just a timeline of how Jerry Lewis became involved in the telethon, but also how his waning popularity contributed to his desire to do so, and why the physical nature of his comedy made it memorable to audiences. She further develops her examination of the MDA telethon through a critique of the role of television and the rise of the disability rights movement and deinstitutionalization, including ex-poster child and disability rights activists' responses to the telethon.

Finally, in her last chapter, *Acts of Conspicuous Compassion: Charity in the Reality TV Era: Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, Moeschen develops an argument about the role of charity practices within a capitalist economy. She links these "acts of conspicuous compassion," as an expression and a message enabled through the reality show format, to charity as a moral civic duty towards the deserving poor she first presented in chapter one. Particularly, her positioning of charity practices as a manifestation of capitalist ideals is quite engaging. Her examination of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* focuses on the centrality of transformation to all charity practices in the U.S., stating that "[t]he act of undergoing, and in turn bearing witness to, extraordinary alteration underlies all charity initiatives sine the nineteenth century" (p. 131). Moreover, she demonstrates how *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* relies heavily on charity

practices as a collective project within capitalist nation-states, validating a libertarian approach to society. This insures that charity remains an act of benevolence that requires public display and approval. It also counteracts any narrative of structural inequalities as social issues needing political solutions and a shift in ideology.

Some dissonances with critical disability studies are found in the book. Moeschen uses “the disabled” and “the physically disabled” throughout her book, without explanation. It should be noted here, that at this point in disability language debates, it is not as much the use of the term itself as the fact that she does not explain her choice of it that unsettles me. The lack of explanation indicates a lack of understanding or knowledge as to why its use is generally considered dehumanizing to disabled people, necessitating a justification for its use. This gap in awareness of disability rhetorical culture is further compounded by her spotty knowledge of the disability rights movement in the U.S.: She glosses over disability rights activists’ efforts to challenge the MDA, making no mention of the work of Harriet McBryde Johnson, which is a substantial omission. Similarly, there is no mention of Helen Keller in her historiography of educational reform for Deaf and blind people. Further, although she centers her analysis within the social, economic, and historical conditions in which they arose, offering a layered and complex account of the forces that shaped charity practices as a performance culture in America, she doesn't include analysis of racial inequalities, immigration (which relates to citizenship very directly), or issues of class discrimination. Since the U.S., like Canada, is a nation-state constituted through colonization, this is a significant omission. Therefore, I think that her book should be also understood by disability scholars and researchers, as an example of how disability became a specifically white social issue when it became a public spectacle. How did the proliferation of white, middle-class images of disability contribute to nation-building as a white

project? How was the development of disabled people as deserving, intimately linked to ideals of whiteness, and how did they shore up racism as a natural and necessary *condition* of nation-building? And, how was physical disability, specifically, used through visual culture to naturalize the ideal citizen as white, middle-class and able-bodied?

Those questions are not included in Moeschen's analysis, but the value of her book to critical disability might lie elsewhere. Moeschen's book is all at once a critical cultural analysis of how disability and white disabled people have been deployed in charity practices since the nineteenth century in America. It is also a complex historical narrative of how charitable sentiment develops as a base for ideals of American citizenship and civic moral virtues. Importantly, it is an example of how a critical disability lens can be applied to the investigation of mainstream cultural phenomena that structure society. It is an important step in the cross-disciplinary application of critical disability studies, notably in its use of performance scholarship as a methodological and theoretical approach to the study of disability as a politically significant identity.