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Motherhood and Activism in the Dis/Enabling Context of War

The Case of Cindy Sheehan

ABBY M. DUBISAR

US peace activist and mother Cindy Sheehan built her authority as a peace activist by yoking her antiwar mission to her role as a mother of a dead soldier son. In a statement addressed to Donald Rumsfeld, secretary of defense during the war on Iraq, Sheehan (2005, 45) wrote: “I wish I could convey to you in person the pain and devastation your reckless policies have brought to my life. The grief is so profound and primal that it can’t be described by the written word. You can’t see my red, swollen eyes or my grief-etched face. Your policies have created a hole in my heart.” As an activist strategy that made her a household name and, as some would say, galvanized the United States peace movement of the early-twenty-first century, Sheehan concretized her emotional pain as a physical disability and then used this metaphor of disability to speak out against the war. What are the benefits and costs of such a rhetorical strategy?

This chapter takes as its starting point the belief that the experiences of disability, here applied to mothering and war, enable as well as constrain rhetorical strategies for US women’s peace activism. Disability studies

1. I would like to thank the editors for their insightful and compelling comments on this essay, as well as Rebecca Dingo, Denise Landrum, and Kate Ronald for offering perceptive and engaged readings of revisions of this piece.
scholars Jay Dolmage (2005), David T. Mitchell (2002), and Amy Vidali (2010) all analyze the implications of disability and metaphor, examining language that appropriates disabilities and the implications of disability metaphor. For example, writers who use disability metaphors in literary narratives, Mitchell argues, employ such language to provide a “shock feature of characterization” and use it as an “opportunistic metaphoric device” (2002, 15). Dolmage further this analysis of metaphors and invites his audience to understand that metaphors are “more than words” and powerfully form our social world. For example, “When bodily experience is written about, metaphors do the work: they explain how we understand and live in the world, and then, in a way, they dictate how we will experience it in the future” (2005, 111). Without metaphors, communicating about bodily experiences would be nearly impossible. Uncovering the entailments of metaphors and the effects of their deployment helps us understand not only the power of language, but also the long-lasting effects made possible by constructions of embodied experiences that rely on normative/nonnormative characterizations. Vidali (2010, 34) gives her audience a framework to apply when analyzing metaphors of disability, one that more fully engages their diversity. She encourages an approach that “refrains from policing metaphor; encourages transgression; . . . and invites creative and historic reinterpretations of metaphor.” Taking into account such approaches to better understanding metaphors of disability, this chapter works to understand the relationship between disability metaphors and antiwar activism, specifically in the context of Sheehan’s rhetorical choices.

What are the consequences, for Sheehan, of using disability metaphors? In what ways are such metaphors effective for some audiences but not others? This analysis of Sheehan’s rhetorical strategies considers possible critiques of her application of disability metaphors, while also engaging the benefits of her alignment with the disability community, connecting the embodied experience of mothering to the embodied and disabling experience of war. Sheehan’s stance as a mother (also fraught with metaphors) is both a plea for audiences to believe her and locate “truth” in her experience and a means to build ethos or credibility, to balance her personae both as an “average American mom” and as an expert on US foreign policy and militarism.
Further, focusing on Sheehan in the larger context of an extended conversation on mothering and disability engages a contemporary understanding of the tradition of mothers' peace activism and illuminates its relationship to the contemporary collective activism of veterans. Those interested in peace activism and disability may be familiar with the tradition of a disabled veteran using her or his position as a hero and sometimes displaying the disabled body to argue against war. In contrast, the tradition of mothers advocating for peace includes in its history women around the world speaking from their own mothering experience, arguing for peace as the main method of preserving life in all contexts. Studying Sheehan is important to a current understanding of activist strategies open to mothers because she combines disability and mothering roles for activist purposes. In addressing her US audience she claims both roles: like a veteran, war has disabled her by killing her beloved son, and, like other mother activists, she uses her role as mother to claim authority and agency to seek change.

**Mothers for Peace: Collective Identification and Strategic Essentialism**

Even though Sheehan does not cite the influence of other women or mother activists in her work for peace, many have come before her. In fact, women's peace activism, defined as women identifying their gender as the motivator for their activist stance and as a site of authority from which to speak against war, began in the context of classical rhetoric. In 42 BCE, Hortensia argued against civil war. According to Cheryl Glenn (1997, 68–70), Hortensia is the only classical woman rhetor whose actual words are recorded by history. With her speech Hortensia represented many Roman women when she decried a ruling that Roman women who owned property be forced to pay extra taxes to support a civil war. In Hortensia's terms, such war deprives women of their sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers, and therefore has negative outcomes uniquely affecting women, who were already politically marginalized. The exigency of war that motivated Hortensia to force her way into the Forum and speak marks the recorded beginning of women's peace activism, understood in gendered terms.
From the time of Hortensia, women have set themselves apart and relied on their own collective experience to build rhetorical arguments for a vast collection of activist causes, including arguing for peace. The history of women's gendered peace activism in the United States is long and rich, and even a mere glossing of it would far exceed the confines of this essay. Sharing a few brief examples gives an understanding of how connecting motherhood specifically to peace activism has been a reliable and ongoing strategy for women, in the United States and beyond. In 1870 Julia Ward Howe publicized mothers' abilities to make political change when she penned the Mother's Day Proclamation as a pacifist reaction to the Civil War. She issued a call for action and hoped to speak for all US mothers when she wrote, “Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn / All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. / We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country / To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs” (qtd. in Benjamin and Evans 2005, 82). Not only did Howe’s words bear importance in her time and help to establish the official observance of Mother’s Day; her proclamation has been used more recently by contemporary peace organizations like CODEPINK, who host annual Mother’s Day rallies and incorporate Howe’s words into their own gendered peace work.

Generations later the Women Strike for Peace (WSP) movement during the 1960s in North America comprised women who yoked their activism to their roles as mothers and to the goal of preserving the world for future generations. As Amy Swerdlow (1993, 187) writes, the Toronto Pledge of the WSP declared, “Women may be able to do what no government can do, pave the way to peace through the love and protection of their children.” However, during this same period, younger women against the Vietnam War were beginning to interpret their antiwar stances, not in mothering, but in feminist terms. Harriet Alonso (1993, 193) notes that by 1965 female student activists were frustrated with the way women and women’s issues were being treated in organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Students for a Democratic Society, and they began connecting the second wave of feminism to peace activism.

This movement led by younger women shook up the motherhood argument and problematized how US women’s peace organizations
recruited younger members, represented themselves as women or mothers or both, and defined how their activism was gendered. One poignant example relates to the WSP. In 1968 the Jeanette Rankin Brigade (JRB) protest occurred, which Alice Echols (1992, 175) names the first all-women’s antiwar action. The JRB was made up of WSP members, and its organizers were “older, liberal women with experience in peace organizations and church groups” (175). They approached the younger women of the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) about participating in the protest, an interaction that proved explosive. Echols writes, “Women’s liberationists rejected as sexist all culturally received notions about women, and they found the Brigade’s equation of femaleness with maternal selflessness especially repugnant” (176). New York members of the WLM went so far as to organize a separate demonstration. They conducted a funeral procession and burial of “Traditional Womanhood” in Arlington Cemetery. During the procession they chanted, urging women to stop “acquiescing to an order that indulges peaceful plea / And writes them off as female logic / Saying peace is womanly” (176–77). This example shows a feminist critique of the mother-activist argument, which seemed—to a new generation of activist women—antiquated and offensive and an enemy of feminist progress.

Despite turmoil within and between women’s organizations on the sexism in, and the danger of, essentializing women by using the figure of mothers for the mission of peace, some activists continued to utilize, on their own terms, the motherhood argument. In 1981 the Canadian organization Women’s Action for Nuclear Disarmament (WAND) began to attract US organizers. The group maintained the association of its mission to motherhood in spite of the establishment of many other feminist women’s peace organizations. These new organizations defined themselves by working for peace and women’s rights, but WAND’s mission stayed focused solely on the nuclear arms race, and its original founding statement affirmed the connection between motherhood and peace by stating, “The first priority of women . . . is the survival of our offspring . . . endangered by the present militaristic policies of those in power” (Alonso 1993, 240). WAND members thus maintained a collective identification as mother activists.
MOTHERS WITHOUT BORDERS: UNDERSTANDING MOTHER ACTIVISM FOR PEACE IN DIVERSE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

In the twenty-first century some women activists like Sheehan continue to define their peace advocacy in terms of an ethic of mothering. US military mom Susan Galleymore collected more than thirty mothers’ stories in her 2009 book *Long Time Passing: Mothers Speak about War and Terror*. She established the organization MotherSpeak in 2004 and started the project of collecting mothers’ stories after having visited her enlisted son in Iraq in order to try and convince him to stop fighting. MotherSpeak “encourages the voices of the apparently voiceless, especially mothers who can teach us about war and terror and how it affects their communities.” The stories from mothers in Iraq, Israel, the Occupied West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, and the United States emblematize MotherSpeak’s mission of peace.

Even though US women like Sheehan and Galleymore may collapse diverse experiences of mothering into a universalizing stance that runs the risk of colonizing the very different experiences of women and mothers around the globe, claiming an activist voice on the basis of being a woman and mother historically has served as a galvanizing strategy for women in contexts beyond the United States. It is worth noting, however, that the stance of motherhood can and has also been deployed for the purposes of justifying war. In fact, many have argued that the tropes of traditional motherhood promote war more than they promote peace, or that valorizing mothers as peacemakers limits women’s potential for power and agency.

SHEEHAN’S CONSTRUCTION OF PEACE MOM: EMBODIED SUFFERING FOR ACTION

Sheehan’s activist stance fits into a long, complex, and ongoing history of women peace activists who have built their activist authority around their roles as mothers. Because she layers more meaning on her activist stance by highlighting her position as a military mother of a dead soldier son, her position can be further historicized. Analyzing Sheehan in light of mater...
dolorosa (the Mother of Sorrows, or suffering mother) highlights an additional lineage of activist mothers. Some women’s groups, most notably Mothers of the Disappeared, have used this icon to connect to women’s suffering, both through public mourning and in the context of war.

Sara Ruddick (1998, 215) explains that the mater dolorosa is “the most deeply rooted [female identity] within war stories. . . . [She] not only mourns war’s suffering, she also holds lives together despite pain, bitterness and deprivation.” Audiences who experience Sheehan’s embodied sorrow and public grief may be familiar with this role, as it appears in popular culture and religious iconography, among other contexts. In several ways, Sheehan recontextualizes mater dolorosa because what she does with her sorrow and grief is quite different from its more traditional nurturing emphasis. Sheehan utilizes her suffering position for action. The central tension of Sheehan’s activist work, a tension that enables her antiwar argument, is her combination of the rhetorical tradition of mother activism and disabling grief, situated in the iconic mater dolorosa. Refiguring this icon, she comes to embody the atrocity of war and to (re)write herself as a veteran. Instead of nursing or rebuilding, Sheehan takes a different path of action for her sorrow and pain. From the start she became a fierce and very outgoing activist for change. Instead of defining the peace mother as nurturing or caretaking, she rebelled from those traditionally female attendant roles to question the war head-on, to camp out at the president’s Texas ranch, disrupting his vacation to make the point that grieving mothers cannot take a vacation from their anguish. She demanded that her grief—situated in her embodied presence—be addressed.

This extremely active and forthright stance made all the difference for Sheehan. In order to explain her motivation for activism and to help her audience understand her experience, Sheehan described how the war affected her life and how she herself was a victim of its atrocity. Her physical descriptions of her suffering grounded her activism in tropes of disability. Analyzing her rhetorical stance necessitates theorizing pain’s relation to change and disability’s relation to an implied healthy body politic.

Ultimately though, her strategies for peace activism risk reinforcing ableism. By blaming war for her pain-filled grief and by communicating this embodied pain as the most destructive and horrific experience
imaginable, Sheehan builds an argument that writes pain and disability as perverse, to be avoided under all circumstances. Because Sheehan is arguing for peace and against war, and doing so with embodied discourses of pain, eradicating war means eradicating pain and disability. Despite the fact that Sheehan is creating a counterdiscourse to hegemonic narratives that war deaths are heroic and meaningful, speaking out against a US political culture she understands as murderous and imperialistic, and having the best intentions for creating peace and justice, her rhetorical strategies are at times troubling. She risks sentimentalizing women and mothers; upholding an ideal of a body free of suffering, pain, or "disfigurement"; and potentially obscuring the political and social importance of providing support for people living with disability, most specifically war veterans. Analyzing Sheehan's metaphors of disability leads us to a richer portrait of Sheehan that considers not only the ways in which she critiques disability, but also refuses to let the powerful and mainstream discourse creators (such as then president George W. Bush, then secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld, and others) control the meaning of her experience. That combination makes Sheehan's rhetorical choices both potentially negative and positive. Such dual implications may affect the disability community, activist mothers, and audiences more broadly conceived. Dolmage (2005, 112) writes, "Largely, those who define disability are not those who experience it . . . those who develop the definitions are not those who would identify themselves as experiencing disability—they therefore may have a vested interest in marking out the other as 'not me.'" Sheehan makes blurry Dolmage's clear distinctions because she both follows the pattern of wrestling definitions by claiming that those who call for war, define war, and mark war's disabilities as heroic do not experience it, yet she also constructs war-based disabilities in order to call for their cessation. What audiences must decide is whether Sheehan's position is one of power or not. The history of women's mother-based peace activism shows a long lineage of women pleading for a position at the podium, and Sheehan must also actively pursue an engaged audience, finding all available means of persuasion. Dolmage further reminds us that "the normative assumptions inherent to dominant discourse will not easily be dislodged . . . discourse that comes from a privileged position in our cultural
hierarchy (like biomedicine) is granted a sort of naturalization and truth, regardless of its veracity” (112). Whether audiences interpret Sheehan as a privileged, able-bodied, white woman who knows nothing about war or disability, or an authoritative mother who experienced firsthand war’s disabling pain depends on their receptiveness to her metaphors and such metaphors’ ability to persuade.

**DEPLOYING THE PEACE MOM: WRITING AND SPEAKING PAIN AND GRIEF**

Since 2004, when she started her advocacy, Sheehan has defined her activism in very physical terms, describing the effects of the war on her life in terms of bodily injury and pain. In order to understand Sheehan’s rhetorical strategies, I am relying on three books that collect Sheehan’s writing and speeches from a wide variety of contexts including blog entries, letters, and interviews, covering her most prolific years of peace activism. In her memoir *Peace Mom: A Mother’s Journey Through Heartache to Activism* (2006b), and her collections *Not One More Mother’s Child* (2005) and *Dear President Bush* (2006a), Sheehan heavily relies on constructing her own narrative of disability through the experience of child death and her refusal to recuperate from the wounds war has inflicted upon her.

The catalyst for Sheehan’s activism came on 4 April 2004, when her son Casey was killed in combat in Baghdad. Shortly after he died, his sister wrote a poem about the family’s grief. Hearing this poem is the moment Sheehan cites as her epiphany, jolting her from complacency and energizing her activism in the midst of her “pain-soaked existence.” She writes, “I was transformed from a private mother into a public peace mom. I was transformed from a shy and horrible public speaker into a brave and powerful orator. I was transformed from a nonwriter into an able author on fire for the truth” (2006b, 59–60). This conversion sparked her career as an activist, one that she has continually defined as marked by disabling pain and sorrow, conditions that are paradoxically also enabling, since she has utilized that position for action—suffering has enabled her to speak and write loudly and clearly for peace.
On 9 January 2005, Sheehan wrote Donald Rumsfeld a letter, which is reprinted in Not One More (2005, 43–46). Sheehan was responding to Rumsfeld’s statement that he “felt the loss” experienced by family members of dead US soldiers and that he shared their grief “at his core” (43 and 45). Sheehan refuses to let Rumsfeld make use of her grief for his own purposes, writing,

My nights are full of grief and my days are full of pain. . . . I wish I could convey to you in person the pain and devastation your reckless policies have brought to my life. The grief is so profound and primal that it can’t easily be described by the written word. You can’t see my red, swollen eyes or my grief-etched face. . . . You have created a hole in my heart and in our family that can never be filled. Never. (2005, 45–46)

Not only does Sheehan not permit Rumsfeld to impose his own meaning on the deaths of US soldiers, but she also emphasizes and reclaims her own ongoing grief. The foundation of her rhetorical strategy is to use a mother’s inconsolable grief as the motive for peace activism, translating her son’s death into change. By publishing this letter and addressing the misuse of grief, she keeps a mother’s grief central and claims its proper use as her motivating force.

Noteworthy also is the cover image of the 2005 volume of Sheehan’s writings. It shows Sheehan holding an Iraqi Veterans Against the War (IVAW) sign and standing next to several young men. Several pages of photos are featured in Not One More. One image centers around a young man in a wheelchair, Tomas Young, who is situated behind a microphone and next to Sheehan, surrounded by IVAW soldiers (91). The photo’s caption notes that Young was wounded in Iraq on the same day that Sheehan’s son was killed. By including such information, Sheehan aligns herself as closely as possible with the experience of disabled veterans like Young. The documentary Body of War (2007) also featured Young, and in an interview featured on the film’s website Young articulates his own activist position following his military service and the film’s ability to communicate his “reality” by stating, “Everybody enlists in the military with
the full knowledge that they might die in combat. But nobody joins the military imagining they will end up paralyzed, in a wheelchair. I hope this film makes people think long and hard before they agree to sign that enlistment contract. *Body of War* will provide more accurate information about the reality of war for them to consider" (Young 2007). Here Young’s message resonates with Sheehan’s. To the question, “As the war continues, more young Americans will come home severely wounded. How will both this film and your political activism help these returning veterans?” Young responds, “Perhaps when they see *Body of War*, injured veterans will realize that they have a valid voice in the anti-war discussion. Silence is not patriotic, at least not in my book. I hope the film will inspire more of them to speak out.” Here Young aligns himself with Sheehan and the peace movement by using the rhetorical strategy of the threat of disability.

Through such imagery as the photograph with Young, Sheehan likewise aligns herself with the disabled soldiers of the war, framing herself and her peace work as being wholly connected to their activism and bodies. She needs them and their support because they offer credibility to her peace mission, showing that she is connected to those who have experienced war firsthand. The iconic nature of the disabled veteran’s body is a powerful cultural symbol, one that audiences recognize as representative of the reality of war’s outcomes and an ongoing, visible memory of war’s battles. For example, US movies critiquing the Vietnam War, such as *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Coming Home* (1978), feature the disabled veteran speaking with increased authority, embodying authentic knowledge about the war experience and building veteran positions, as icons who translate “foreign” combat experiences to a domestic civilian audience. 2

In sum, Sheehan gains rhetorical power by identifying herself with physically disabled veterans, but there is danger in this association as well, as she too simply claims to understand veterans’ experiences, both their past embodied knowledge of war and the present physical and mental consequences of their service. In this identification, she also appears to endorse

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an unstated warrant that living with disability is a horrendous outcome of war. That said, as far as I am aware, no critique of Sheehan from disability activists or veteran activists has been launched against her based solely on her disability metaphors or her associations with disabled veterans.

Identifying herself with veterans is also relevant for understanding Sheehan's 2006 volume of writings, *Dear President Bush*. Hart Viges, an Iraq war veteran, wrote the foreword to the book, offering testimony to the significance of Sheehan's advocacy. Viges describes his war experience: it left him contemplating suicide after his deployment ended, and he eventually became active in Veterans for Peace. He went to Crawford, met Sheehan, and began to speak out against the war. He compares Sheehan to Rosa Parks, describing her as a "spark" for the peace movement (2006a, xxx). He is moved by her ability to use grief and sorrow rhetorically to communicate her message, stating that she "is bringing her pain out to bear, letting everyone know that there are thousands of other mothers going through what she is going through . . . showing the country how war destroys the family" (xxx). He persuades readers to believe that she has been successful to a degree, able to take the pain she is experiencing and use it to effect change. Reciprocity can be noted here as well, as in 2006 Sheehan wrote the foreword to Veteran for Peace activist Mike Ferner's book *Inside the Red Zone: A Veteran for Peace Reports from Iraq*, in which Sheehan credits soldiers as being the real heroes (2006, x).

Sheehan's memoir, *Peace Mom* (2006b), perhaps most fully exhibits Sheehan's rhetorical use of grief, sorrow, and physical and emotional pain. As she chronicles her history as a mother, the experience of suffering Casey's death, and the reflections she has to offer on her activist life thus far, the mater dolorosa persona comes to life through her descriptions of the grieving experience. Sheehan writes, "After Casey was killed in Iraq, I walked through my days in a state of pain that was and still is both physical and emotional" (69). The effects of her son's death are bearing on her body and mind, in the most literal sense. Later in the book Sheehan writes, "I had horrible back and neck spasms, and I discovered that a broken heart wasn't just an expression: it was a literal pain that hurt worse than any broken toe or finger I had ever suffered. Women always talk about how painful childbirth is. Child death is far more painful; it's like
having a vital part of oneself amputated without anesthesia” (87). Because the parental disability of child death is hidden, since its visible physical and mental manifestations are few, the position of pain and suffering must continually be reinscribed to remind audiences of the grief-stricken condition. In offering these descriptions and metaphors Sheehan believes that her audience is invested in a condition of normalcy—that is, shares a desire to eradicate pain and disability and to protect mothers. She is constructing herself as a “normal” mom who does not “deserve” to have her son killed and, in the process, reaffirming the ideology of normalcy more than directly attacking the politics of war making.

The reference to amputation in the previous quotation is especially dramatic and problematic. The visual image Sheehan conjures by describing her son’s death as her own un-anesthetized amputation exemplifies the intensity of her pain and, moreover, aligns her experience once again with that of a war veteran, for example, one missing a limb whose body is permanently refigured. Such a comparison is risky, as her imagined identification of being like a veteran, through the dead limb/son equation, appropriates a significant outcome of modern warfare, which she has not experienced. Likewise, ableist cultural understandings of amputees often focus on how veterans have “overcome” the difficulty of living in an amputated body or how prostheses facilitate a return to normalcy. For example, coverage in the *New York Times* of Iraq veterans with amputations portray such individuals as forever-changed persons who express concern over their now-freakish bodies; as heroes able to overcome their circumstances and surpass others’ expectations that amputation would leave them depressed, inactive, and immobile; and as bionic, elite athletes competing in the Paralympics with impressive prosthetic limbs and record-breaking abilities. Such depictions work to reassure readers that amputees are rehabilitating and will lead “normal” lives; at the same time they freakify the veterans with photographic portrayals of their changed bodies. These discourses and images contribute to a widespread belief that being disabled is a grotesque horror.

At the same time, however, the outcome of Sheehan’s claim of being disabled by Casey’s death is much more than merely rhetorical. Soon after his death she lost her job because of panic attacks (2006b, 90). Panic attacks
are a form of invisible disability, often discounted by ableist culture. While Sheehan tries to harness all available ways to make her disability argument persuasive—in convincing her audience that her disabilities are both physical and emotional—relying on this range of pained embodied experiences is fraught with its own problematic elements. Her overall argument implies that through the cessation of warfare emotional and physical disability can and should be prevented and eradicated.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES AND ACTIVIST MOTHERING**

As any rhetorician does, Sheehan accepts risks and drawbacks to the position she has developed as a speaker and activist. While she may be enacting a transgressive practice of disability metaphor that exemplifies Vidali’s vision, one that, “actively mines our own stories and artful re-renderings that play on the diversity of ways that we come to see and know” (2010, 34), Sheehan’s attempts to collect all available means of persuasion that layer emotional arguments in the positions of disabled, grieving mother, may be potentially problematic for some audiences. Her work has implications for others, including persons with disabilities and activist mothers, who may see Sheehan adopting roles that undermine their own subject positions, whether or not they support her antiwar stance.

Tobin Siebers (2001, 178) warns that “pain is not a friend to humanity. It is not a secret resource for political change. . . . Theories that encourage these interpretations are not only unrealistic about pain; they contribute to an ideology of ability that marginalizes people with disabilities and makes their stories of suffering and victimization both politically impotent and difficult to believe.” Siebers goes on to note that “there are only a few images of pain acceptable on the current scene, and none of them is realistic from the standpoint of people who suffer pain daily” (743). Perhaps the pain that Sheehan exhibits in making public her sadness is one of the few culturally acceptable types of pain, a mother’s grief. Sorrowful mothers are at times a protected group, given permission to grieve longer and more fiercely than others who suffer the death of a loved one. Siebers, however, might not classify the type of pain Sheehan is suffering with
that of individuals who suffer physical pain daily, as she wishes. He notes that physical pain is neglected by current body theorists, who regularly align their understanding of pain with psychic or emotional pain, often caused by societal influences (744). But Sheehan has no interest in body theory or its critiques. She might be crossing an important line between emotional disabilities caused by intense sadness and embodied pain, such as when she references amputation to discuss the palpable absence she feels from the death of her son. However, to her, her pain is as real as the most intense physical pain, and thus she does not imagine distinguishing between these types of disabling experiences.

Her rhetorical moves and metaphorical constructions yield a range of effects on her audiences, some of whom criticize her as being too melodramatic or even exploitive. In May 2007, Sheehan announced her retirement from the peace movement by writing a blog entry entitled “Good Riddance Attention Whore,” sharing negative critiques launched her way over her three years of activism, accusations that she advocated on behalf of her own self-interests and desire for the media spotlight. In the end, many audiences failed to find Sheehan persuasive, and she left the movement convinced that her son died for nothing. Whether audiences were less convinced by her public form of embodied grieving, unwilling to see a mom as an authority on matters of war and peace, or resistant to any antiwar message, her counterdiscourse was not successful, in her own terms.

By using suffering and pain as rhetorical forces, she may have incurred additional risks of alienation from her audience. Ruddick notes, “displays of suffering are notoriously unpredictable. . . . People who witness suffering may respond with sympathy and help, but they also may turn away out of indifference, fear, disgust, or worse, be strangely excited by the spectacle” (1998, 216). Elaine Scarry (1985, 5) further theorizes how problematic and unstable communicating pain can be, specifically because of its ability to evade language. Physical pain has no referential content, so it is not of or for anything. Pain takes no object and thus resists objectification in language. Sheehan’s positioning of her embodied grief may not be the best example for mother activists to follow because of its instability and subjectivity. Both Scarry’s theorization of pain as slippery,
never sufficiently communicable, and Ruddick’s observations about outsiders’ reactions to suffering bring to light the risks Sheehan takes when building her arguments in the context of embodied mother-pain. Furthermore, Sheehan and other activists, relying on turning pain into action, may endure audience reactions similar to the very real lived experience of persons with disabilities, who are ignored and misunderstood on a daily basis, not only because truly comprehending another persons’ embodied experience, whether pained or not, is nearly impossible, but also because people without disabilities often interpret disability as related to pain. People associate pain with mortality and death and turn away from pain, just as cultural attitudes of normativity and ableism motivate people to distance themselves from the disabled.

Despite these risks, many are invested in translating pain into power and action. Feminists like Audre Lorde, writing about her experience of breast cancer, encourage women to find power in the shared experience of pain that is part of embodiment. We are all only temporarily “abled,” and Lorde implores us to make use of experiences of illness, pain, and disability by attempting to “integrate this crisis into useful strengths for change” (1995, 421). Sheehan’s work answers Lorde’s call: Sheehan speaks from her own experience, makes political meaning of her own personal situation, and moves her suffering from a private and hidden experience to a shared argument that war creates grief-stricken mothers, investing herself in communicating that experience to bring about action and change.

Sheehan’s particular activist strategies have further implications for mother activists. Related to Sheehan’s appropriation of disability, her position as mater dolorosa runs the risk of sentimentalizing her experience and the experience of other mothers. Using the role of mother to ground an activist stance has been critiqued by second- and third-wave feminists and others as reaffirming traditional women’s roles of caretaker and nurturer, as essentializing women and limiting their individuality by portraying them as relational rather than autonomous.

Sheehan’s combination of the dis/enabling power of grief with the tradition of mother activism does lead to other risky implications, such as begging the question of whether mothers must have to suffer the death of a child or some other dramatic event in order to be activists. Also, when
Sheehan positions herself as an “über mother,” and tries to engage all US women through their potential for motherhood, she interprets the experience of mothering in a limiting way, yoking it to biological connections and sentimentalizing the role of mother as the only true and pure voice for peace. Similarly, Sheehan hopes her activism will have positive consequences for potential victims of war around the globe, yet she never situates her work in the context of contemporary mother activists for peace around the world. Instead she assumes the universal applicability of her own understanding of what is necessary to end war.

On the other hand, Sheehan has shown that the role of mother is one that still attracts attention and holds authority. In 2005 *Time* magazine ran a feature on Sheehan during her “occupation” of Crawford, Texas. One particular bit of analysis speaks to the power of Sheehan’s being a mother and emphasizes that role. Because she is a mother, the US administration does not have protocol for dealing with her. The *Time* reporter mentions a TV ad running in Crawford that featured Sheehan’s plea to Bush. Using ads on TV, however, is not something a mother does but is a rhetorical move of a politician. Analyzing the potential significance of occupying such rhetorical spaces, the article stated, “Once Sheehan starts acting like a politician . . . she will become just another voice in the debate—easy, in other words, to neutralize. But until then, Bush’s team cannot fire back hard, as it usually does when it is criticized. Sheehan must be handled, as an adviser to the President put it, ‘very carefully’” (Ripley 2005, 25). This understanding of Sheehan’s persona is particularly important when measuring the implications of her work to other activist mothers, showing how the rhetorical positioning Sheehan developed enabled her to occupy multiple spaces of authority and move between rhetorical situations—gaining a political audience, garnering support from veterans and others against the war, critiquing the president and other members of the administration from the “innocuous” position of mother, and claiming as her most powerful voice the experience of a mother whose son was killed in war.

The idea of diversity must remain at the center of our future discussions of the intersections of feminism, activism, war, and disability. Vidali’s discussion of metaphor seems the most productive and inclusive
because of her emphasis on diversity. She writes, “A disability approach to metaphor attends to how diverse bodies impact metaphor acquisition and use, which shifts [concern about] disability away from something only ‘used’ or ‘represented’ by metaphor. [The approach] must engage the full range of disability; resist the desire to simply ‘police’ or remove disability metaphors; actively transgress disability metaphors by employing a diverse vocabulary; and artistically create and historically reinterpret metaphors of disability” (2010, 42). Sheehan’s “body” of work shows the complexity of using disability and mothering metaphors to both activate a political persona and push the limits of what diverse audiences find persuasive.

Sheehan’s activist career was in some ways short-lived but in other ways very prolific. It is impossible and perhaps too soon to determine definitively what lasting effect her work will have on our understanding of the dis/enabling power of pain and disability or the rhetorical power that mother activists will continue to have in the twenty-first century. What we do know is that she was able to gain notoriety and have her voice heard. For now she remains one of the United States’s loudest, clearest, and most uncompromising voices against war, a voice articulated out of a place of dis/enabling grief and mothering.