

Special Editors’ Introduction: Engaging the Possibilities of Disability Studies

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[W]e might say that disability refers to the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of bodily, mental, or behavioral functioning aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.

— Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*¹

Rhetoric needs disability studies as a reminder to pay critical and careful attention to the body. Disability studies needs rhetoric to better understand and negotiate the ways that discourse represents and impacts the experience of disability.

—Jay Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*²

1 McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. NY: New York UP, 2006. Print.

2 Dolmage, Jay Timothy. *Disability Rhetoric*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2013. Print.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes disability as “the most human of experiences, touching every family and—if we live long enough—touching us all” (5).³ For Allison, disability has always been a lens through which I’ve viewed and understood people and environments, my family, and myself: growing up with an autistic older brother who my mom constantly advocated for, helping my mom when she was sick with cancer and couldn’t get out of bed or drive to the store, negotiating my own depression and anxiety. Disability shaped my family and was thus very personal. It wasn’t until I was in my Master’s program and had Jay Dolmage as a teaching mentor that I realized disability could be something more. As a Ph.D. student at Syracuse, I took classes in the Disability Studies Program that made me start thinking about what rhetoric and composition can learn from disability studies, what we as instructors can learn from non-normative literacies and disabled composing processes, what we as scholars can learn about rhetoric and writing from cultural, historical, and disciplinary representations of disability.

For Bre, disability has informed my pedagogical choices and who I am as a teacher and learner. Very early in my teaching career, as a graduate TA in my MA program, I had a deaf student in my composition class. A sign-interpreter accompanied the student to each class. I learned right away that my typical extemporaneous, multimodal delivery style would not enable this student to learn in the same capacity as other students. Almost instantly, I needed to alter my teaching, and I observed that the changes benefited all learners. I realized from this moment that effective pedagogical design required training, and I discovered quite early, thankfully, that sound teaching required constant revision. A few years later in my Ph.D. program at Miami University, Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson introduced me to Disability Studies and pedagogy as intertwined areas of scholarship, again transforming my teacher ethos. As a writer, I struggle with the boundaries between creativity and standard, and I tend to get lost in the invention stage, what’s too much—when to stop. I must channel from disability studies and remember that it’s acceptable to question convention. From this issue, I have re-remembered that the boundary between personal and public always blurs and from that fuzziness knowledge and possibility emerge.

3 Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory.” *NWSA Journal* 14.3 (Fall 2002): 1-32. Print.

Scholars in composition theory and pedagogy, rhetorical history, digital writing, civic and public writing, technical and professional communication, and writing center studies have turned to the lens of disability studies to question and challenge the field's normative treatment of students and writing practices. This special issue is devoted to the important intersections between disability studies and public rhetoric, civic writing, and service learning. In his rhetorical reading of disability studies and composition, Robert McRuer defines disability as an "open mesh of possibilities" (156). For this issue we asked, *how might teachers, scholars, and activists work together to re-engage disability studies as a productive site of possibility?* Within this question, there is room to think about our research and scholarly practices, our teaching and pedagogical practices, and how we can make our intellectual communities more accessible. We have a range of interviews, scholarly articles, literacy narratives, and book reviews, and we hope that this collection sheds light on how disability studies—as a theory, as a methodology, as a critical practice—can disable and re-enable how we think about genre. We organized the manuscripts we received into three broad categories: rethinking research, the rhetorics of unruly bodies, and disrupting pedagogies. They illustrate the possibilities of disability studies to help us rethink our research practices (not only what we study but how we study it and what kinds of scholarly *ethos* we value), identify how bodies have been constructed and represented and how we can begin to re-represent them moving forward, and then the possibilities of disrupting our pedagogies within the classroom, discipline, and community. These categories are not fixed and stable, however, and their themes overlap and may create conflict as the authors grapple with methodology, literacy, how we research and teach, and representations of and discourses about disability.

Although this special issue addresses a range of perspectives on the many different themes, questions, and pathways worth exploring in disability studies, it is not exhaustive. And we realize that there are perspectives and issues worth exploring that are not represented within these pages. The interviews featured here focus on two emerging threads in disability studies that are not prominent in this issue: technology and new media and critical race theory. Like so many of the authors represented here, as co-editors we wanted to highlight critical perspectives and questions, and we are pleased to offer

interview responses from three interdisciplinary scholar-teachers: Dr. Melanie Yergeau, Dr. Beth A. Ferri, and Dr. Nirmala Erevelles. Like the authors featured throughout this issue, these interviewees approach disability from a range of perspectives. As a researcher and teacher of composition and rhetoric, digital media studies, disability studies, and autistic culture, Melanie Yergeau offers insights on her positioning within disability studies and new media, how technology increases (and sometimes denies) accessibility, and the role of social media in disability advocacy and activism. As scholars and teachers who are more firmly rooted in social and cultural foundations of education, critical race theory, and disability studies, Beth Ferri and Nirmala Erevelles speak on their work at the intersections of race, gender, and disability and offer insights about the values of placing race and disability in dialogue in pedagogical contexts. Like other pieces in this issue, we hope these responses answer questions and also continue to raise critical questions about how disability studies can inform our disciplinary conversations, our teaching practices, and our scholarship.

RETHINKING RESEARCH

All of the pieces in this issue rethink research, questioning and pushing on how we do research and what we value in our scholarly and pedagogical practices. We open with “Dangerous Reciprocity: Creating a Madness Narrative Research Methodology” by Cynthia Fields who examines how the relationship between researcher and participant is complicated by mental illness. In this scholarly madness narrative, which is an autobiographical account of mental illness, Fields develops a methodology to represent mental illness in ways that resist traditional characteristics of academic research; that is, resisting objectivity, linearity, and rational progression. Representations are fragmented and non-rational in madness narratives, and you will see in this piece the refusal of a tidy conclusion, changes in tone and focus, and the use of whitespace and section breaks to indicate experiences that cannot easily transition or be represented. Fields both theorizes and enacts a narrative that resists a linear, rational progression and pushes on the objectivity between researcher and participant, arguing that adopting a madness narrative methodology allows us an opportunity to understand the world in non-rational ways. The themes of this piece resonate in all of the pieces of this

issue, and many of the authors adopt a more self-reflexive researcher position, interrogating their own positionalities as researchers and making the body more central to how we understand a topic.

RHETORICS OF UNRULY BODIES

This emphasis on the body, and specifically how we represent and talk about disabled or non-normative bodies, is continued in the next grouping of essays. Though one addresses disability history museums and the other addresses popular discourses about Fat and disabled bodies, both pieces illustrate how cultural representations play an important role in our understandings of and de/valuing of disabled bodies and forward ideas about how to reshape these narratives. Focusing again on research and methodology, Lauren Obermark and Muffy Walter use a mixed methodology that blends disability studies with rhetorical analysis and feminist historiography. “Mad Women on Display: Practices of Public Rhetoric at the Glore Psychiatric Museum” is a case study of the Glore Psychiatric Museum in Saint Joseph, Missouri, and the authors argue that disability history museums often inform public knowledge and discourse about disability. However, this representation is not necessarily positive because—as the authors argue—these representations are often inaccurate and unethical, particularly with regard to mental disability. Because of this, disability history museums often reinforce stigma. Building on the infamous disability rights movement slogan “nothing about us with us,” which advocates for open discussions about disability and action *with* disabled populations who would be affected by such action, the authors argue that as a methodology, “nothing about us without us” allows us to be more inclusive under-represented or neglected perspectives and voices. In the case of this rhetorical analysis of the Glore Psychiatric Museum, this means weaving the narratives of the women represented in the museum into the article itself—writing *with* women who were institutionalized rather than writing *about* them. This focus on collaborating with the people we write about and study—even if they have passed or can not speak for themselves in the traditional sense—asks us to be critical of the way we position ourselves as researchers, how we engage with those that we study, and how we can work together to create more accurate, ethical representations.

Laura Thacker continues the discussion of representations of unruly bodies with a compelling argument about the connection between the discourses that circulate about Fat and disabled bodies. "Overcoming the Odds: Disability Studies, Fat Studies, and Rhetorics of Bodily Control" poses interesting questions that ask us to reflect on our cultural discourses, such as "how do mainstream rhetorics of Fatness relate to mainstream discourse about disability that suggests, albeit implicitly, that you should constantly try to control your disability?" Specifically, Thacker explores how both Fat and disabled individuals are only positively acknowledged in public discourse if they take control of their deviant bodies. The piece explores how *rhetorics of bodily control* reinforce the overcoming narrative that positions disability as something that must be overcome for an individual to be successful. Disability studies scholar and activist Simi Linton argues, "The ideas embedded in the *overcoming* rhetoric are of personal triumph over a personal condition" (18)⁴, and Thacker illustrates how overcoming narratives and weight loss testimonials mask and render invisible the Fat and disabled bodies who do not fit into or who refuse those narratives. Like Obermark and Walter, Thacker is sensitive to how we can include the voices of those who have been silenced, arguing that by acknowledging how rhetorics of bodily control silence Fat and disabled bodies, we can work toward creating a space for those bodies to speak back.

DISRUPTING PEDAGOGY

While the first three pieces focus on research, our scholarly practices, and rhetorical analyses of how disability is represented in cultural spaces, the last three take a critical turn to teaching and our pedagogical practices. In the first piece, Julie Jung addresses how we can work toward a more accessible community of scholars by reconceptualizing the term "pedagogy." "Interdependency as an Ethic for Accessible Intellectual Publics" draws on Robert McRuer's definition of accessibility⁵ in order to develop an understanding of pedagogy that moves beyond the classroom. Jung argues that reimagining pedagogy as something that moves beyond the classroom—in a way that encourages learning to

4 Linton, Simi. *Claiming Disability*. New York: New York UP, 1998. Print.

5 In *Crip Theory*, McRuer writes, "An accessible society is not one simply with ramps and Braille signs on 'public' buildings, but one in which our ways of relating to, and depending on, each other have been reconfigured" (94).

emerge as a dynamic process of interrelation—can be a useful way to think about our scholarship. That is, there are nested relations and interrelations that make our work possible, which we can more fully understand and map through discussions of disability studies concepts like independence, dependence, and interdependence. While independence is often criticized for its normalizing tendencies that deem dependence as abnormal, interdependency is a useful way to imagine how our work is always nested in relation to others. For example, this interdependence occurs in the classroom by how we choose to present information and readings to students, shaping the intellectual endeavors they may pursue beyond the classroom. Or in a different context, we see interdependence at play in the context of mentoring, which helps to build an intellectual system of reciprocity. By being more conscious of the ways our practices impact and sustain these larger systems, we can more proactively design assignments, activities, and classroom spaces that acknowledge how the work we do cannot exist without the help and care of others.

While Jung's piece offers a more theoretical perspective on pedagogy that has important implications for our classroom practices, we also include two literacy narratives that offer more explicit reflections on disability and pedagogy both within and beyond the classroom. Annika Konrad offers a pragmatic reflection, posing the seemingly simple question: "Why study disability?" In this literacy narrative, "Why Study Disability? Lessons Learned from a Community-Writing Project," Konrad offers a meta-analytical response through a blend of narrative with scholarly conversation. Specifically, this piece narrates the author's own experiences of learning through a community writing project how a disability studies lens can inform our understandings of language and the teaching of writing. Like other pieces in the issue, Konrad grounds her narrative in a discussion of methodology, using Jay Dolmage's *métis* methodology as an opportunity to better understand the rhetorical choices that disabled writers in the community writing project made when discussing and representing disability.

In the last pedagogical piece, "Services on the Beach: Hyper-Focused Lessons from Hurricane Sandy," Susan Naomi Bernstein weaves a narrative that addresses disability, literacy, service, and pedagogy

in times of national disaster. Specifically, Bernstein uses Hurricane Sandy as an opportunity to reflect on the power inequalities facing vulnerable populations, such as the residents of Queens, NYC and those in psychiatric settings. Like the piece we open with, this narrative pushes on the form of the linear essay, jumping from segments—discussions of Hurricane Sandy, mutual aid, and the basic writing classroom—in order to tell a narrative through what Bernstein calls “a hyper-focused lens of ADHD sensibilities and ethos.” By reflecting on her own hyper-focused moments of ADHD that enable her to write with a child, Bernstein is also critical and self-reflexive of service efforts that might be perceived as charitable or altruistic—an important final reminder of pausing to listen to the needs of those we work with and teach.

Along with the articles and narratives in this issue, we also include a range of book reviews that not only address the specific goals and questions of this special issue but also the larger scope of *Reflections*. For example, Katherine Silvester’s review of Kate Pahl and Jennifer Roswell’s book *Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story* explores what we can learn about community literacies and classroom practice by focusing on how everyday objects allow students to make meaning in new ways. Like the authors in this issue, Pahl and Roswell’s book raises questions about what it means to take an artifactual approach to literacy, asking questions about how artifacts connect communities, how they create different power relations, and how they inform writing practices. As Silvester notes, this book has implications for a wide range of practitioners: from pre-K to K-12, in higher education, and within community contexts. And with Pahl and Roswell’s focus on students who are often labeled *different* (focusing specifically on migrant families and English language learners), this book has powerful connections to how we can reimagine our literacy instruction—and the literacies students bring with them to the classroom—to more inclusively encourage students’ non-normative literacy practices.

As we know, the fight for inclusivity, equal access, and social justice applies more broadly to a range of groups, issues, and historical moments. Following her interview with Edward Peeples in the last issue of *Reflections*, Candace Epps-Robertson reviews his memoir

Scalwag: A White Southerner's Journey through Segregation to Human Rights Activism and focuses on Dr. Peebles' journey to becoming a social justice advocate. Like other authors in this issue, the narrative of Dr. Peebles is critical and self-reflexive of his own positionality as a researcher and advocate of race-based human rights activism. As Epps-Robertson notes in her review, "we must remember to examine our positions, biases, and ideologies, and to understand the toll that justice seeking takes on the body and soul." The memoir not only offers us lessons in self-reflexivity and self-care in moments of (emotionally and physically) taxing social justice, but also calls on us to blend our commitments to social justice both in our classrooms and in the communities that exist beyond the academy.

We also feature two book reviews that are more firmly rooted in disability studies but that share similar themes with the other reviews—namely, an emphasis on inclusivity, an interdisciplinary approach to self-reflexive research, and a commitment to practices that not only benefit our students but also the communities that we engage with beyond the university. In her review of Tracy Ann Morse's *Signs and Wonders: Religious Rhetoric and the Preservation of Sign Language*, Elizabeth Bentley highlights the importance of interdisciplinary research, noting that Morse positions her project at the intersections of disability, religious, and rhetorical studies. These critical intersections connect with interests in education politics, community literacy, and civic activism. Morse's focus on how Deaf community activists have employed religious rhetoric in order to advocate for the preservation of sign language offers a compelling case for the community-building and public advocacy work of faith-based deaf advocates. By tracing Deaf culture and language through the founding of Gallaudet, the deaf education debates in the late nineteenth century, and how twentieth century technologies impact deaf community advocacy work, Morse raises critical questions about the relationship between deafness and technological advancement. Indeed, as Melanie Yergeau addresses in her interview, the relationship between technology and disability advocacy is complex and worth our attention as scholars, teachers, and advocates.

Finally, we end with a discussion of difference through Stephanie Kerschbaum's recent book *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*. In her

review, Tara Wood argues for the relevance of this book for teachers and scholars who are invested in cultivating an awareness of difference, noting that the book offers “not only an innovative theoretical framework for considering difference but also a well-articulated set of tools for navigating the play of difference in our classrooms, among our students, among ourselves.” Importantly, an awareness of difference (what Kerschbaum terms “marking difference”) is different from and more critical than attempting to label difference identities and render them as static and fixed (which she terms the “difference fixation”). Wood very clearly illustrates how a detailed analysis of how the difference fixation manifests in our practices contributes to both disability studies and writing studies. And though the book is largely focused on the writing classroom, Wood notes that Kerschbaum’s framework can be usefully applied to community-based writing projects and to public rhetoric initiatives. Like other pieces in this special issue, Wood and Kerschbaum clearly point to the issues of trying to construct difference and disability into stable, fixed categories, instead of focusing on how we can mark difference and what we can learn through real-time, classroom exchanges with the students we serve in our classrooms, on our campuses more broadly, and even those writers we engage with beyond the classroom.

When we released the call for papers, we offered authors a broad range of access points through which they might begin to think about these open mesh of possibilities: What possibilities emerge when placing disability, literacy, and pedagogy in conversation? How does a focus on disability foreground issues of access and inclusion in the teaching of writing and rhetoric? How can scholars, teachers, activists, and workers create meaningful partnerships with disability activists and community groups? We invite you all, as readers, to consider these questions and ask new questions as you read through this issue. These questions reject easy answers, and they push us to be critical of the normative standards we place on research, teaching, community advocacy and activist work. As editors of this special issue, we are honored to present you with a range of genres—interviews, scholarly articles, literacy narratives, book reviews—that smartly and critically address the possibilities that emerge when we approach our practice with disability studies in mind. As you access this issue—whether from start to finish or in small pieces, while pacing or stimming or

rocking—we hope that the authors’ self-reflexive, careful attention to scholarly and pedagogical practice encourages you to think about how we build and sustain more inclusive, accessible intellectual communities.

Allison Hitt is a fourth-year Ph.D. student in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Her research focuses on increasing accessibility within our writing pedagogies, particularly with our field’s emphasis on multimodal and new media composition. Her dissertation combines rhetorical analysis and qualitative interviews with students and instructors to explore how rhetorics of overcoming manifest in our disciplinary scholarship and in our classroom and writing center practices. More broadly, Allison is interested in how disability is constructed and mediated through technology, whose voices and stories we value through archival projects and disciplinary histories, and how we can work as a community to theorize and enact more socially just pedagogies and teaching practices. She inherited her passions for teaching and social justice from her mom, Susie, who was a champion for so many.

Bre Garrett is an Assistant Professor and Director of Composition at the University of West Florida. She teaches classes in writing and rhetorical theory, research methods, composition pedagogy, and public writing. Her research intersects the areas of embodied rhetorics, writing pedagogy, and writing program administration. As a teacher and administrator, Bre strives to design accessible curricula that is available to diverse student learners. She has published work on multimodal composing, rethinking the canon of invention, and writing studio pedagogy. She is currently working on an article that situates writing studio as a pedagogical approach that re-enables standard composition curricula. Her book project investigates corporeal rhetorics and embodied methods of teaching writing. Her entire life has recently been altered, in a good way, by the birth of her first child, Eilley Rose.