

Interviews with Melanie Yergeau, Beth Ferri & Nirmala Erevelles

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The format for the following interviews may seem a little unconventional, but that also keeps with the theme of this special issue: smart scholars offering insight in ways and genres that have been traditionally positioned as unconventional. Instead of highlighting one interview for this issue, we place three scholars in conversation about the possibilities of disability studies specific to each scholar's work. Margaret Price defines "crip time" as "a flexible approach to normative time frames" (62),¹ and our interviews operate in crip time, too. Instead of speaking with scholars in a conventional, synchronous interview format, we emailed them questions to answer at their leisure—on their own time, in their own space. Because we feature asynchronous interviews, these responses resist the typical "flow" or back and forth of traditional interviews. We hope that this also allows you as readers to access the interviews in crip time—to focus on the questions that interest you, to move back and

¹ Price, Margaret. *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2011. Print.

forth between questions and people, to draw connections, and make your own meaning among the questions and themes presented here.

As we mentioned in the introduction, we wanted to use the interviews as a space to focus on emerging threads in disability studies that are not prominent in this issue: technology and new media and critical race theory. We begin with Melanie Yergeau whose work with new media, autism, and disability advocacy in the field of rhetoric and composition offer us multiple ways to think about how disability studies informs our discipline and the teaching of writing, what role technology and new media play in increasing or denying accessibility, and how social media can facilitate processes of advocacy and activism. Then we offer interview responses from Beth Ferri and Nirmala Erevelles, who are both situated within disability studies and education. We asked them both to reflect on their work at the intersections of disability studies and critical race theory, and they both draw connections to their interdisciplinary (or transdisciplinary) positions, the importance of paying attention to historical contexts, and the need for more collaboration and critical conversations about race and disability. And although we hoped there would be connections across their responses, we also hoped each would draw on her own expertise and offer her own critical insights. For example, Beth Ferri grounds herself in women's and gender studies, discusses how to draw similarities between race and disability while critically engaging in one another's struggles, and reflects on teaching at Syracuse University with its commitment to social justice and disability studies. And Nirmala Erevelles draws on her background with post-colonial studies to place herself (and her work) in transdisciplinary and transnational contexts, emphasizing the importance of paying attention to people's material lives and being self-reflexive of one's own positionality. These responses are in conversation with larger transdisciplinary conversations about disability studies, race, technology, and rhetoric and writing, and we hope that you find them as thought-provoking as we do.

RESPONSES FROM MELANIE YERGEAU

1. How do you situate yourself within disability studies and new media / digital writing?

I situate myself within and across disability studies and digital media studies usually by means of access. Access is a key term in both domains, even though it is sometimes used to signal different things. While disability activists and scholars typically invoke access to center the civil rights of disabled people, digital scholars often use it to reference things like digital divides, technological literacy, open-access movements, or web accessibility. This isn't to say that these framings of access don't have significant overlaps—they most certainly do. Much of the work that designers and scholars do around disability within digital studies is often premised around making artifacts, texts, and spaces more broadly accessible for disabled users—something that disabled people have long been fighting for.

I think a disconnect happens, though, in that designers still often see disability as a challenge or problem to be solved within a particular project or product, rather than as an inventive site for rethinking design practices from the outset. In many respects, I think this comes down to conversations around universal vs. participatory design. Universal design is about designing for the maximum number of users possible, regardless of disability status. Conversely, participatory design is focused more on design practice than on end product: it's all about involving the users of a product in the design process itself. As a field, disability studies has long been moving toward participation over (or sometimes in tandem with) universality. In technical communication and in composition studies, we can also see this move in the work of people like Jay Dolmage, Michael Salvo, and Jennifer Bowie, among many others.

Across disciplines, access tends to be rendered as a material problem, and Adam Banks has written a great deal on the profound limitations this presents in *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology*. That conversation is where I see the interstices of digital studies and identity studies fields (including DS, but also critical race studies, gender studies, and so on) being so generative and exciting. I see access as a kind of opening: not

merely an opening for more bodies but an opening for transforming larger systems that would deny some people access to begin with. So, in a word, access isn't merely about getting in. It's about subverting and reinventing how we think about and enact participation, design, and relationships with others. Tanya Titchkosky, a disability studies scholar, claims access as an orientation, and I think this is a framework that digital studies could widely benefit from.

2. What brought you to these intersecting fields? How do you think they contribute to and/or build on each other?

I was accepted into a graduate program in writing primarily because I had a background in web design. Even though my undergraduate degree is likewise in writing, I spent a significant portion of college as a computer science major before switching my program of study. As a result, I landed a graduate assistantship in which I worked as a web coordinator for my university's English department.

While I was drafted into doing digital rhetoric kind of by default, I never imagined I'd pursue disability studies. At the time I began working on my MA, I was interested in DS for personal reasons, primarily because I identify as disabled. At the time, I thought of DS as a kind of support system or intellectual party: I needed it and loved it, emotionally speaking, but I didn't feel comfortable, in essence, with studying myself. It wasn't until I began my PhD that I really began to question what I was doing in my digital studies life and why I wasn't doing stuff that involved my disability life, which was really rich with activism and crip awesomeness.

There's a certain exigency that comes with disability studies. It's there in digital rhetoric and pedagogy too, of course, but working around disability involves—*necessitates*—working with actual people. It's the kind of scholarship that is both activist and always tied to community. And I think that this is what disability studies lends to digital studies frameworks: it provides a set of methods, ethics, and access points for thinking not only about users, but also about the systems that govern both users and use. Or, to put it differently: Disability studies doesn't just ask us to think about how we can get more disabled people to use a product or interface. Instead, it makes

us confront the practices and structures that went into making that product or interface in the first place.

I think sometimes a harder question for me is what digital media studies lends to disability studies, if only because my identity, as a human, is so enmeshed in all things disability. (I was born with a disability, and I'll die with it; I can't say the same about my computer, alas.) It's a question that needs to be asked more, because I worry that disability studies > digital media studies is too unidirectional, and at times, functions as a corrective discourse rather than an inventive one. For me, I think that digital rhetoric especially has provided an immense framework for how we might think more capaciously about disability cultures. In my work, my earliest thinking around autism and identity was indebted to rhetoric. Rather than perceiving my hand movements as symptoms in need of curing, I began to think of stimming as a kind of autistic rhetorical commonplace. Autistic culture is a highly mediated disability culture, a culture forged in large part by online spaces. Digital rhetoric enabled me to think more expansively about, say, markers of Autistic style or delivery.

Built into conversations on digital rhetoric are conversations about divergent knowledges and the many ways in which people make meaning, and we can witness these arguments from the earliest moments in the field (thinking especially here about the work of Gail Hawisher and Cindy Selfe). Historically, digital rhetoricians have had their work cast as lesser from the larger field of composition and rhetoric, in no small part, I think, because so many people who do the work of digital rhetoric are doing work that intersects with many different experiences of marginality. As well, even in 2014, we are still having the conversation about whether digital media really belong in writing classes. The conversation is tinier but still there.

Of course, regarding digital rhetoric and cognitive difference, everything I've said above is both true and extremely untrue. Rhetorical traditions constrain more than they enable, and digital studies boasts histories that elide lived experiences of marginality. Digital rhetoricians who do work around disability, race, gender, and/or class have long critiqued the field for failing to center that which should be central. Some excellent examples of such offerings

would be Angela Haas's work, which examines the ways in which digital scholars are quick to "discover" ideas and inventions (such as hypertext) that have existed far back in time, ideas and inventions that were authored by indigenous peoples. Another such example is Patricia Dunn's *Talking, Sketching, Moving*. While not strictly a digital studies book, Dunn offers both a critique of linguistocentric models of education, while also advocating for multimodal classroom practices that are low-tech, often non-computery, and broadly accessible to a diverse body of learners.

3. What does disability studies offer rhetoric and composition? How does a focus on disability foreground issues of access and inclusion in the teaching of writing and rhetoric?

This question, in large part, was the topic of my dissertation. In it, I argued that disability studies offers, well, *a lot* to rhetoric and composition. It forces us—as teachers, scholars, citizens—to rethink long-held, vexed notions about audience, authorship, textuality, and composing processes. It re-orient us to questions concerning audience and which bodies/minds are given primacy.

My own tendency, when considering such a question, is to think about the construct of audience in our field and beyond. Through both my research and my experience as a teacher, I've come to believe that most teachers are incredibly well-meaning and want desperately to be inclusive. But something backfires in the process of designing courses and curricula, because instructors generally don't have occasion to think about disability—or, at least, not in a manner that is concerned with, or conducive to, course or programmatic design. Disability is only an institutional thing in that there exists an office on campus that deals with disability, and as teachers, we don't live there. Disability isn't our thing, our domain, our responsibility (or so the logic goes).

Because of institutional politics (not to mention larger, cultural perceptions of disability), we don't think about disability in the context of students-as-audience. And, more importantly, we don't provide opportunities to compose for disabled audiences or to think about the kinds of composing practices in which disabled people have engaged

or theorized. When the focus is on helping or rehabilitating disabled people, it once again positions disabled people as lesser and as non-audiences/non-agents. So it's a dual thing: first, we design classes in ways that don't value the knowledges and embodiments our disabled students bring; and second, we don't ask our students, collectively, to compose for/with disabled individuals or to study their cultures/practices/work with the same kind of care, responsiveness, or rigor that we would of other (read: abled) groups/practices/theories.

This, to me, represents an important space (and opportunity) for disability studies within rhetoric and composition. Disability has potential to complicate and extend all kinds of notions about audience. As a timely example of what I mean by this, I direct our attention to recent conversations on trigger warnings. Across scholarly and popular media, trigger warnings (or TWs) have been represented as less-than-positive descriptors that have the potential to censor instructors, create a generation of demanding and whiny students, and dismantle the entirety of higher ed as we know it. More scarce has been the coverage in support of TWs, which has variously positioned them as access measures for disabled students, veteran students, women and non-binary students, students with lived trauma, students of color, queer students, and so on. It is not lost on me that academics and politicians would have such strong reactions to composing practices that originated within—and are continually theorized by—a number of marginalized groups. And rather than apprehend TWs as a kind of situated composing practice, one meriting rhetorical study and discussion, the discourse around TWs has instead functioned as a yes/no binary regarding whether or not to use them. What's more, the discussion has largely been led by individuals who do not identify as disabled or as having lived experiences around trauma. Likewise, the discussion is often written for or directed toward, a similar, stock, non-disabled, non-traumatized audience. (A good example of a piece that explores the problems around TW discourse is Kathleen Livingston's recent essay in *Harlot*.)

I mention the above because we lose so much when we think only of audience as a non-descript, majoritarian kind of deal. Audience isn't and shouldn't be a numbers-and-normalcy game.

4. *What does accessibility mean to you as a writer, scholar, and/or teacher?*

Care, crip time, awkwardness, community, infrastructures, relationship, process. And sometimes, none of the above.

Accessibility isn't static, and it isn't a thing / product / end goal, and it sometimes works for one person and totally flops for another, because bodyminds are funky and divergent and don't always play nice in the same space or under the same fluorescent lights. Jay Dolmage famously described access as a way to move, and Margaret Price's work has expanded upon this idea a great deal. Accessibility isn't where we arrive. Rather, it's an ongoing process, a heuristic, a conversation that never ends.

Accessibility is about taking disabled people seriously. Disabled academics are routinely not taken seriously. Each time we confront a stage or auditorium filled with stairs, we are not taken seriously. Each time a conference presenter fails to offer text handouts or verbal descriptions of PowerPoint images, we are not taken seriously. Each time an instructor tells us that our accommodation requests are unreasonable or unfair to other students, we are not taken seriously. Each time we are told how brave and inspirational we are for waking up in the morning or for going out in public, we are not taken seriously.

I would describe accessibility, then, as a move toward seriousness. It is a series of serious moves that often conflict but often draw people into community and collaboration. Accessibility is a kind of lurching. It centers disability, which means that it zigzags and likes to be anxious, and ever-attentive, to who is moving within and beyond its reach.

5. *Your work often centers around autism and autistic discourses, which you connect with issues of advocacy and self-advocacy. And at this past year's Computers and Writing, your keynote address focused, in part, on digital activism. What role do you think new media and social media play in these processes of advocacy and activism?*

Digital media play an enormous role in disability rights activism. There are a number of reasons why disabled activists gravitate toward social media and other digital platforms. First might be distance and

group identity. Disabled people are often the only ones in their family with a disability, and even in school, disabled students might not encounter another person with their disability. Web fora, then, play an important role in facilitating disability cultures and communities. In addition to connecting disabled individuals with each other, online spaces also enable disabled people to organize around political and human rights issues. As one example: Not Dead Yet, a disability rights group that opposes assisted suicide, makes prolific use of social media as a means to organize f2f protest actions but also as a means to organize virtually (e.g., via online petitions, blogging campaigns, and so on).

As well, digital media have long represented a kind of disability access point. A number of disabled people describe computer technology as their primary or preferred mode of communicating. This is especially the case within Autistic cultural spaces. Many autistic people describe online spaces as ideal because of their asynchronicity, their textuality, and their potential to make subtext (such as emotion or intent) overt.

Anyone teaching within disability or digital studies would profoundly benefit from examining the kinds of activism that disabled people do online. Some of the most relevant and exigent disability theory is happening on blogs. (Temple University's disability studies blog has an impressive directory of disability bloggers.) Of course, because blogs are often considered non-academic, this same theory is understudied and typically ignored.

I think it's important to note, however, that disability activism isn't exclusively digital. As mentioned in response to an earlier question, digital media is likewise quite exclusionary. There is the very real issue of cost. Not only is adaptive technology expensive but so is owning a computer and purchasing an internet subscription. Disabled people are a notoriously under- and unemployed population, and often, they are barred from accessing the very technologies that would not only improve their quality of life but also connect them with their people, their cultures. Of course, as Adam Banks suggests, access doesn't end at *owning* a computer. There are also issues of functional use at play: computer interfaces make abled assumptions around literacy, both digital and print-based. They often require reading and writing

proficiency, manual dexterity, muscle memory, short- and long-term memory, not to mention a non-anxious disposition. Much of disability culture is inaccessible to disabled people precisely because it is digitally born. And that's a problem.

6. *What do you see as future work that should be—or maybe is being—done with regard to technology/new media and disability studies?*

Because I'm a rhetorician, I am keenly interested in issues of representation, and I mean this in a two-fold kind of way. First, I'm interested in looking at how disability, as a phenomenon, is represented across a wide array of media (primarily digital communities in my case, but still, other locales too, like literary criticism or medical journals).

However, more than textual representations of disability, I'm interested in representation from a *constituency* kind of sense. That is, I'm interested in the ways in which disabled people are included (or not). I'm interested in how disabled people advocate and make meaning, how they agentively shape the discourse on their own lives, and direct and participate in conversations that concern them (and even conversations that don't). I want to know *who* is authoring stories about disabled lives.

Issues of representation, then, are particularly important because most of the people writing about disability — across media — are, in fact, non-disabled people. And most of the people who are considered “experts” on disability are, in fact, non-disabled people. As mentioned earlier, my own particular scholarly focus is devoted largely to autism, a community in which non-representation is a common theme. Because autism is so present in public consciousness, it's become an iconic case study in the politics of the non-disabled speaking for (and often over) the disabled. What's so amazingly frustrating is the sheer vibrance and quantity of texts that autistic people have produced over the past three decades — texts that have been largely ignored, in large part because most of what autistic people compose is online, non-vetted, and thus considered lesser or altogether unworthy by autism researchers.

I believe that questions of representation are generative questions. They not only indicate ideal futures (futures of participation and transformation), but they also point toward the kinds of ethical considerations that many, many fields so desperately need to engage. Moreover, these questions are not limited to disability. Instead, they call upon the kinds of questions and urgent pleas that scholar-activists within critical race studies, sexuality and gender studies, and class/socioeconomic studies, among others, have been making for decades, centuries, millennia. They are the gritty kinds of questions that enable us to consider what makes a community, or what makes an identity, and how one might ethically write from within or outside.

Of course, a number of people within rhetoric and composition have engaged questions around positionality, method, and ethics (see, for instance, Kerschbaum's *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, Royster's *Traces of a Stream*, or Cushman's "Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change"). And I think these are models for how we might not only think about, but enact, a politics of representation within the field, within our classes, and within our cultural spaces. In all of this, I hope I have pointed out the ways that disability must be part of such inquiry, and I look forward to seeing more of this work in the field.

Melanie Yergeau is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Michigan. Her primary research interests include composition and rhetoric, digital media studies, disability studies, autistic culture, and pedagogy. She has published articles in journals such as Computers and Composition Online, Disability Studies Quarterly, Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy, and College English. She is currently working on a book project about autism and rhetoric.

RESPONSES FROM BETH FERRI

1. How do you situate yourself within disability studies and critical race theory? How does your background in education inform this work?

I would say that I am an interdisciplinary feminist disability studies scholar whose work is most firmly situated within disability studies in education. I do not identify as a humanities scholar—although I have done humanities-based work in narrative analysis, film studies, etc. I do not consider myself a historian either, although I have done archival and historical work. I was trained as a qualitative researcher, but my training was more post-structuralist and less traditional than most qualitative research, so I would say that I approach all manner of texts from that training. I see all texts as texts—whether those are political cartoons, editorial pages, interview transcripts, narratives or lifewriting, performance art, etc. As an interdisciplinary scholar, I have never understood the desire or the need to divide up the field into social sciences and humanities. Perhaps I am undisciplined.

2. You've published a lot about DisCrit—a critical theory that blends disability studies and critical race theory (CRT). Can you tell us about this? Why are these fields useful to place in conversation?

I was introduced to DS through Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) and was introduced to WGS through Black Feminist scholars, so my thinking about disability studies was from the very beginning deeply informed by intersectionality. Prior to my doctoral work, I was a special education teacher and saw first hand how special education served mostly to protect general education from having to accommodate or include students with disabilities in their classes. I also saw how race and social class were often used as a proxy for disability and vice versa. In other words, special education at that time and still today, was (and is) very much a class and racialized space—sometimes a gendered space as well, leading to special education serving disproportionate numbers of students of color. Students who are very similar in terms of their learning needs are further sorted by disability label, even within special education.

My earliest work in DS tried to get at the underlying logics of the intersections between disability, race, and gender. My first book length project was a historical look at ways that people justified segregating students based on race in the years surrounding the historical *Brown v. BOE* decision, which (with my colleague David Connor) we read against ways people justified segregating students with disabilities in self-contained classrooms and special schools. I was not trying to draw a simple analogy or parallel between these two very different histories but rather provide a way to understand some of the underlying ways of thinking that justified marginalizing particular students within public education and the structures, like special education, that provided the tools of that containment.

As far as DisCrit—I think the initial project for me was about trying to really delve into the connections between critical race studies and DS. I am deeply troubled by analogic thinking—and ways both DS and CRT are rife with analogic thinking. This shows up in uncared parallels, drawn between race and disability or uncritical analogies to race or disability. Both sides are equally guilty of this. So, I am thinking more and more about how to create places where we really engage critically with one another and find ways to work, as Maria Lugones writes, margin-to-margin. This entails not just finding similarities between race and disability but also engaging in one another's struggles—even ones that are not necessarily shared. I am just starting to think about this as a potential way forward for both fields.

3. *What do you think disability studies offers teachers interested in enacting a critical or radical pedagogy?*

I've written a bit about this in a chapter called "Teaching to Trouble."² In that chapter, I tried to operationalize what I do in the teacher education classroom and the thinking behind some of those practices. Our teacher education students who are getting certified in special education, both undergrad and master's level, have an introductory course that is grounded in disability studies in education. Their introduction to the field is through a social model lens. I think this

2 Ferri, Beth A. "Teaching to Trouble." *Vital Questions Facing Disability Studies in Education*. Ed. Scot Danforth and Susan L. Gabel. New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2006. 289-306. Print.

sets the stage in terms of the rest of the program and their careers. I think for students, it helps them shift the object of remediation from “broken” or “deficient” students to inaccessible or unwelcoming learning environments. It helps them see that the student (or the parent if it’s a very young child) is the expert of their experience and a vital source of information when it comes to their learning styles and preferences. And, it politicizes their thinking about disability as an aspect of diversity—one that intersects with other aspects of diversity. These themes get revisited in later courses, as well as through campus experiences with disability studies lectures, film series, cultural events, etc. It is not necessarily a traditional approach in the larger field, but as disability studies in education has grown, we are seeing more of an impact of this collective work beyond Syracuse University.

4. As someone situated with the School of Education, we’re interested in your thoughts on how disability studies informs education more broadly. What does inclusive education gain from disability studies and critical race theory frameworks? What can higher education and the public sphere learn from disability culture?

When you take a professional field like education and infuse that practice with a theoretical and critical framework, you create praxis—the embodiment and enactment of theory. I may be turning around your question, but I think the influence is actually more dialogic than your question implies. Professional fields are often seen as atheoretical or as “just practice,” but I’d argue that professional fields are actually where theory lives and breathes through enactments with real bodies and lives. I also think theory bubbles up through those enactments—so the two are vitally important to one another. Historically, even within fields (like education and writing), we have fields that are seen as more practice oriented and those that are seen as more “academic.” I think there is so much great work at the intersections of those disciplinary divides.

We can’t wait until students with disabilities grow up and go to college for them to learn about disability studies. We need to be using special education spaces more critically and politically—what if those spaces became cultural spaces where disability culture could

be fostered, where activist projects could be nurtured, etc. I'll give you a few examples:

One of our doctoral students and a self-advocate who works in our university classes, worked with a local school to create a schoolwide "I am Norm" campaign to promote inclusive practices in schools and in the community.

In my secondary education classes, I talk about how inclusion is not just about "who" they are going to teach but also about "what" they are teaching. I start this class with students researching disability history—starting at early civilizations up to the emergence of the disability rights movement. We then try to make cross-curricular connections to this history, brainstorming ways to infuse disability content into social studies, science, math, language arts, science, and the arts. This approach is much like a multi-cultural approach. So we start with infusing the curriculum and then move to ways to make their actual teaching practices more inclusive through universal design and adapted or inclusive teaching strategies.

A few years back, we had a series of film series sponsored by a disability activist student group on campus, the Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee. One year we did a Saturday morning cartoon event where we brought in little kids to talk about disability in cartoons. When the kids got a little antsy, we played a game I call "40 ways to get there." In that game, we all line up and each person has to think about a different way to get from point A to point B. Kids walk, roll, leap, crawl, but in the end we celebrate how creative our bodies are—how differently we all moved—but how we all got to the same place. Little kids are amazingly open to thinking about difference, and it shows us how disability studies content needs to be infused throughout the curriculum—not just at the university level.

5. Syracuse is home to the Center on Human Policy, a well-known Disability Studies Program, and a large number of disability advocacy organizations. Could you speak a little to the disability culture/community on campus? What is it like to teach in this community? How can we create disability-inclusive climates across campuses?

My friends and colleagues in disability studies in education call Syracuse University, “Planet Syracuse” because it really is a special place when it comes to disability studies. We have a longstanding commitment to issues of social justice and disability studies—starting with the work of a former Dean of the college, Burton Blatt, who did the first photo exposé of the conditions in disability institutions in NY State. Because of that work, Syracuse was really at the epicenter of the deinstitutionalization movement. Other political and activist work followed—pushing for independent and community living, communication rights, inclusive education. We also have the very first Disability Studies program in the States, the first joint disability studies and law degree, and the first disability cultural center. So, coming here as a student or a faculty member, you are aware (or you get aware) that you are a part of this long and proud legacy of activism around disability issues.

I think most of us feel accountable to that history—we know we must remain vigilant and keep pressing—finding ways to always be thinking about the next struggle, the next push for access. But it’s a real privilege to teach here. I have been told many, many times over the course of my own career that I should be at Syracuse. This is because SU is recognized as “home” for critical disability studies work. Our students are amazing to teach because many of them come here for the same reason—they have heard that this is the place where they’ll be able to do the kind of work they want to do. So there is a synergy that happens that is quite exciting.

I think in addition to our academic programs, BCCC has been vitally important to creating disability culture on campus. The years that BCCC hosted film series, for example, was a high mark, because they were really raising awareness and increasing visibility across campus but in a very focused way. Colleagues and students from across campus were coming to the films and getting introduced to disability studies. We actually have more disability programming than ever now (from speakers, to conferences, films), but it feels a bit more diffuse. This diffusion of programming reflects the various locations and connections of DS across campus and into the wider community. The question it seems to me is how to allow for and even encourage diffusion of DS across various locations, while still retaining a kind

of “center” or core thematically that helps move the conversation forward in a coherent way.

6. *What are next steps for thinking about the important connections between race and disability studies?*

I think we need more concerted efforts to have sustained and critical conversations. We need joint conferences and workshops—spaces where we can foster sustained dialogue. I also think we need to read across our two disciplines a bit more than we do.

Dr. Beth A. Ferri is an Associate Professor in the School of Education and coordinator of the doctoral program in Special Education at Syracuse University. She teaches classes in multiple programs at Syracuse, including Teaching and Leadership, Cultural Foundations of Education, Disability Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies. As she discusses in her interview, Dr. Ferri's teaching and research interests include disability studies, inclusive education, feminist disability studies, and narrative inquiry. She has published numerous articles focusing on the intersections of race, gender, and disability in journals such as Teachers College Record, Race Ethnicity and Education, International Journal of Inclusive Education, Remedial & Special Education, Gender & Education, Disability Studies Quarterly, Disability & Society, and the Journal of African American History. She published a book with David J. Connor in 2006 titled *Reading Resistance: Discourses of Exclusion in Desegregation and Inclusion Debates* and published her second book *Righting Educational Wrongs: Disability Studies Law and Education* in 2013. She is currently working on a project with Teachers College Press about *DisCrit*.

RESPONSES FROM NIRMALA EREVELLES

1. How do you situate yourself within disability studies and critical race theory/post-colonial studies? Can you say a little bit about how you understand and work with these terms?

Disability studies, critical race theory, and post-colonial studies are what I consider transdisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary projects. By rejecting the term interdisciplinarity, I am refusing rigid boundaries between disciplinary projects that coalesce at certain carefully defined nodes of commonality and yet at the same time respect different disciplinary borders. I opt for the term transdisciplinarity because I believe that my work, rather than respecting borders, crosses haphazardly across these disciplinary boundaries to explore the ways social difference is framed in shifting, intersectional, and complex ways.

The primary location of my own work is in disability studies. Disability studies scholarship engages disability as a social/political/cultural construct and offers a radical critique of normative politics—a politics that disciplines all aspects of social life. In fact, disability studies foregrounds the violence of ableism. According to disability studies scholar Fiona Kumari Campbell, “the regimes of ableism” enact “the notion of the normative (and normate individual) and the enforcement of the constitutional divide between perfected naturalized humanity and the aberrant...It is not possible to have a concept of difference without ableism” (6).³

Given this definition, it is possible to see how ideologies of ableism leak into ideologies of white supremacy and institutional racism, as well as discourses that have justified colonialism and (post) colonialism in transnational contexts. For example, ideologies of white supremacy and institutional racism situate whiteness as normative, and as a result, these ideologies have been used to justify the oppression of non-white bodies via the practices of colonialism and slavery for economic profit. Conceptually, then, my work foregrounds how social difference is historically constituted within

3 Campbell, Fiona Kumari. *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.

the shifting frames of racialized subjectivities, colonial and post-colonial practices, and ableist ideologies—all of which are mediated by the exploitative violence of transnational capitalism. In other words, I take up a transdisciplinary approach to study difference across the boundaries of critical race theory, post-colonialism, and disability studies as situated within the political economic context of transnational capitalism.

2. In your book Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling Transformative Body Politic, you discuss the intersections of critical race theory (CRT) and disability studies, arguing that they're both socially constructed, theorized as relational concepts, and both value narratives of those affected by racism and ableism. Can you break down those ideas for us? How do CRT and disability studies inform each other, and what do we gain from those intersections?

The politics of difference has historically been organized around the logic of “divide and rule.” I remember this term from my high school history textbooks in India that described the colonialist strategy by the British to foreground any difference as dangerous and suspicious across regional, religious, and caste divisions—a strategy that was successful in destroying any possibilities of coalition building and solidarity across difference. I argue that a similar logic separates non-dominant communities in the US and transnationally. For example, as I alluded to in the earlier question, both disability studies and critical race theory foreground how oppressive conceptualizations of difference are utilized to support hierarchies along the axes of race and disability. In other words, being black or being disabled has always signified some distance from a fictionalized norm that is white, non-disabled, heterosexual, bourgeois, and patriarchal. Essentially then, theorists in both critical race theory and disability studies are critical of normative ideologies and normative material practices that organize difference along oppressive hierarchies.

And yet emancipatory meanings of blackness are unwittingly encouraged to distance themselves from disability, as in “I may be black but I am not deviant/stupid/uncivilized/non-human/dangerous”—all meanings that have historically been associated with disability. Thus, for example, counter-narratives in critical race

theory argue against segregation in both educational and social contexts, by calling out the oppressive effects of attributing disability to black bodies that they argue has justified over representation of black students in special education classrooms, the passage of black students along the school to prison pipeline, discrimination of black people in employment, housing, and the criminal justice system, to name just a few. So of course, it seems natural for critical race theorists to be uncomfortable engaging in meaningful ways with disability studies.

On the other hand, I have argued along with several other disability studies scholars that critiquing the oppressive logic attributed to disability would undo not just racial oppression but also oppression along the axes of gender identity and sexuality. Counter-narratives from the disability community argue that though disabled bodies/minds do have real physiological and material differences, these differences are not calamities to be avoided, ignored, and or lamented but are instead as disability activist/artist Neil Marcus calls “an ingenious way of living.” These counter-narratives alternatively propose that disabled lives are desirable, creative, sexy, and teeming with unique potential and possibility and that the barriers to an enriching life as a disabled person can be attributed to inaccessible spaces, ideologies and practices that are exclusionary, and therefore, oppressive. Thus disability studies scholars call into question the uninterrogated association of disability with lack—an association that is often unwittingly supported by non-dominant communities who could be potential allies.

It is this very fraught context that the issue of intersectionality becomes critically salient for both theoretical analyses and transformative praxis. Scholars in both critical race theory and disability studies seem unprepared to engage with the material lives of disabled black bodies who fall outside the analytic boundaries of both critical race theory and disability studies. If critical race theorists distance themselves from disability while claiming this association as the ideological source of black oppression, then where do disabled black people fit into an emancipatory narrative that requires the negation of a salient part of their identity? Alternatively, disability scholar, the late Chris Bell, has argued that contemporary disability

studies scholarship is essentially “white disability studies” that does not engage the different material experiences and epistemologies of black disabled people.⁴ Additionally, I have argued that not just in the U.S. but also transnationally, one does not always acquire/claim a disability identity at birth or via an accident/illness. One can also become disabled through the social violence of oppressive practices such as slavery, poverty, war, colonialism, and the exploitative labor practices of transnational capitalism.

It is in this context of intersectionality that my own work takes up a relational analysis. In other words, I argue that in the specific historical context of slavery (e.g., reading Hortense Spillers’s essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”⁵) that race and disability rather than being additive and/or mutually exclusive constructs are in fact mutually constitutive of each other. By that, I mean that in order to justify the violent economic conditions of slavery, African men/women/children were simultaneously transformed into black (disabled) bodies because being black was akin to being naturally disabled and at the same time becoming disabled by virtue of the violence of slavery enacted on black bodies. In contemporary contexts, I have argued that children who are funneled via the school-to-prison pipeline are also marked as “naturally” deviant because of their simultaneous characterization as black AND disabled. In these contexts, intersectionality is critical in analyzing the complex ways in which subjectivities are constituted across the different axes of race, class, gender identity, disability, and sexuality.

3. *A key theme in disability studies is representation and who is speaking about disability and for disabled populations. You addressed this recently in the Disability Studies Quarterly article, “Thinking with Disability Studies.”⁶ How do you position yourself within the field, and why is positionality important to address? How might teachers interested in taking up disability studies consider positionality?*

4 Bell, Chris. “Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal.” *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. Routledge: New York, NY, 2006. 275–82. Print.

5 Spillers, Hortense. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64–81. Print.

6 Erevelles, Nirmala. “Thinking with Disability Studies.” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34.2 (2014). Web.

Positionality is a critical concept in all discussions of difference—not just in disability studies. But when engaging positionality, I am not referring to a simplistic understanding of identity (e.g., are you disabled or not?). As I discussed in the article you have referred to here, identity is never ever a completely settled matter. It is always historical and always shifting contextually. For example, while writing that article, I had identified myself unequivocally as a non-disabled ally. However, in the past few months, my body is no longer identified as medically “normal.” Does this identification then make me now part of the disability community? Will the medical labels give me membership status automatically? But then, we know that disability is not just biological/medical; it is also social. If I have not as yet experienced exclusion/oppression/violence as a result of my non-normative body, then can I be considered a genuine member of the disability community? If I can pass as non-disabled and therefore continue to enjoy the privileges of an ableist society, then am I an insider/outsider in relationship to the disability community?

I am reluctant to answer these questions, not because I am being coy about them, but because it foregrounds the complex nature of positionality as a historical construct. At the same time, I argue that a critical reflection on our historical location in the fields we teach, and learn, and research, and transform is important. Positionality, notwithstanding its shifting terrain, holds us accountable to those communities with whom or about whom we speak. In this case then, positionality is a relational location of a scholar, a teacher, a researcher, or an activist not just within the disability community, for example, but also other non-dominant communities.

For teachers interested in taking up disability studies, owning up to one’s accountability to the disability community in all its complexity becomes paramount. In other words, one’s positionality in relationship to the disability community would necessitate that we are critically self-reflective of our accountability to the knowledges created by and for the community. For example: Whose knowledge of disability are we sharing in the classroom? What exclusions are enacted? What efforts of inclusion have been attempted? Can these knowledges have transformative potential?

4. What possibilities emerge when placing disability, race, and pedagogy in conversation? What do you think disability studies offers teachers interested in enacting a critical or radical pedagogy?

Classroom spaces are always already racialized, classed, gendered, sexualized, and ableist. What I mean by this is that classroom organization, classroom etiquette, and classroom curriculum are already organized around hierarchies of race, class, gender identity, sexuality, and (dis)ability. As such, those students who deviate from the normative classroom expectations are subject to social violence that can be either subtle or blatantly apparent. In this context, placing disability, race, and pedagogy in conversation via an intersectional lens opens up the classroom space for a critical disruption of the norm. Because disability studies always foregrounds a critique of the norm, a disability studies perspective enables students to first identify the normative disciplinary practices that rule the classroom space and work in order to disrupt them.

For example, during something as simple as classroom introductions, just pointing out to students that they do not have to introduce themselves in the order that they are seated is first a little disruptive to the normative order of things. Because one cannot predict who will raise one's hand for his/her turn or even just speak without raising one's hand, students become conscious of paying attention to other cues in the classroom. They are more observant, more thoughtful, more connected to each other. They also become conscious of power in the classroom. Who feels enabled to take up space? Who does not? What kinds of speech are supported in the classroom? What language practices seem alien to the classroom? Why? What practices of (in)accessibility are apparent in the classroom? I argue that a disability studies lens that always insists on intersectionality would enable such discussions to proliferate in the classroom and can also be transformative.

5. One of the things we wanted folks to consider and highlighted in the CFP for this special issue was how we enact disability studies theory in practice, specifically in activist or community engagement contexts. How can scholars, teachers, activists, and workers create meaningful partnerships with disability activists and community groups?

I think the most important practice is enabling access to activists and community groups, especially in academia. I say that even while I admit that I do a poor job of this, I am better at including in my curriculum the work of disability activists and community groups that my students will read and/or analyze in relationship to more formal texts. For example, my students read and reflect on blogs, YouTube videos, reports of community meetings, poetry, etc. that are created by disability communities of color alongside academic scholarship. I also link my classroom curriculum to real world struggles (like for example the shooting of the African American teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri by a white police officer), and discuss how issues of intersectionality both complicate and strengthen the struggle. While the murder of Michel Brown has been situated purely as a race issue, issues of disability, class, gender, and sexuality also intersect with race. It is important for us to reflect collectively as academics and activists on our usage of pedagogies and practices that extend beyond pre-determined boundaries of difference and work towards building coalitions that can be collectively transformative.

6. What are next steps for thinking about the important connections between race and disability studies?

I think we need more critical conversations between critical race theorists and disability studies scholars where we do not use disability or race as metaphor in the other's struggle. We also need to enable and encourage more disabled scholars of color to be a critical part of the academy. We need to engage more seriously with the class dimension in both critical race theory and disability studies and its implications for the sustainable futures of disabled people who live at the intersections of so much difference. We need to expand this discussion in transnational contexts that extends beyond cultural ideologies of disability to engage the material conditions that produce disability as well as to explore collectively the issue of access in transnational contexts. I argue that it is also important for us to rethink both in communities of color and in disability communities how we include and imagine those in the community who survive at the intersections of difference.

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