

# How to Crip the Undergraduate Classroom: Lessons from Performance, Pedagogy, and Possibility

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## Abstract

My work in disability performance studies has taken place within the context of a small liberal arts college over the past decade, and has been more multifaceted than I had ever expected. This essay was originally conceived as part of a panel convened at the Society for Disability Studies Conference in honor of the publication of *Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights* (Lewis, 2006). I reference this volume, the first published collection of its kind, as a model and catalyst for defining strategies that educators wishing to incorporate disability studies into their campus community life, inside and outside of the classroom, might adopt. In the essay, I outline four such strategies and discuss them, using examples from my own experience: a) “cripping” the canon, b) “cripping” the curriculum, c) enlisting your colleagues in the performance of disability, and d) creating alternative on-campus performances of disability.

In 2006, Theatre Communications Group published *Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights*, edited by disability theater scholar Victoria Ann Lewis. Lewis’s anthology was the first of its kind: As scholars of multicultural drama and women’s playwriting had before her, she looked to the history and current landscape of activism and theater in search of a previously disregarded community, seeking a wider representation of disabled playwrights. While a burgeoning cadre of scholars in disability studies and theater was producing work studying the history, aesthetics, and political/performance strategies of disability theater, very few plays by disabled playwrights were actually available in published form for classroom study and theatrical production. This absence suggests all too well the place disability holds in the theatrical canon and in the larger society of which theater is representative: hidden in plain sight. Ironically, many of the narratives about disability in American culture, as in American theater, have been grounded in a dual, paradoxical identity: the simultaneous erasure *and* hypervisibility of disability. In other words, the only two options typically offered have existed as a “shut in” (behind the walls of the nursing home, rehabilitation hospital, institution, or private home) or life as a carefully defined and policed kind of representation (the freak show, the villain, the

poster child, the heroic “supercrip,” the inspirational figure, the miraculous cure, or the tragic but noble sufferer, to name just a few).

Theater fascinates disability studies scholars like me because it can move into the gaps between extreme subject positions to offer counternarratives, simultaneously moving the disabled bodies of actors and characters stage center in a way that models a new kind of social presence and visibility<sup>1</sup>. For me, a professor of dramatic literature with a specialty in disability studies, *Beyond Victims and Villains* (Lewis, 2006) is significant for obvious reasons; it enriches the body of available works written engaging disability. The late John Beluso, one of the most important playwrights in recent history, wrote about and from within disability culture, once remarked in an interview, “I remember when I was a freshman, I went to the library and did a search for disability and theater, and it came up with zero hits. I was quite shocked, I started thinking, ‘Who are the great disabled playwrights? Who are the ones that I’m going to learn from?’” (Lewis, 2004, p. 38). Lewis’s

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1 One need only look at the work of the Los Angeles-based theater companies Deaf West, or Blue Zone, for example, to become acquainted with the excellent work companies with disabled professional actors are doing to make this happen.

book offers the work of some of those playwrights, including Belluso himself, but for the purposes of this essay I want to suggest that it posits something more: a useful model for the teaching of disability studies that points to strategies possible for the dramatic literature classroom and others beyond it. In this essay, my larger project is to offer some strategies to colleagues who might feel a similar absence of disability in their own classrooms. Indeed, I offer these strategies not simply as a move toward the integration of disability, but in an attempt to convince others to do something even more radical: “crip” their own classrooms.

Disability studies scholar Carrie Sandahl (2003) has explored the intersection of the terms “crip” and “queer,” describing how they both function to reclaim labels back from the pejorative for pride, express the fluid identities of the communities they represent, and work as verbs expressing contestation (pp. 27-28). In that last instance, “to queer” or “to crip” the known is to twist our expectations of it, defamiliarize it, and render it anew in ways that open up new kinds of possibility. That promise is built on denying the very binarism that would establish queer and crip identities as that against which, respectively, “norms” of sexuality and ability can be defined. Sandahl (2003) emphasizes, therefore, that the verb “cripping” can be used to describe the radical, edgy work of artists or activists that

spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects....[and to] expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity... (p. 37)

So it would seem that criping is at the heart of any activist classroom concerned about advancing disability culture. And yet, if the term criping is unfamiliar, how much more so must so-called “disability thinking” be to any of us who have not had to question the privileged position of our own bodily, cognitive, and/or pedagogical normalcy? And so, as a place to begin, I offer what I interpret as some of the some of the broad political and practical strategies of Lewis’s text, stemming from its philosophy, aesthetic, and structure, as a sort of catalyst-cum-template.

Why use a drama anthology as metaphor and model for implementing disability studies across diverse disciplines? For those of us who teach or want to teach from a disability studies perspective, regardless of our field, the classroom represents a space of performance,

in which we might historicize disability, represent disability culture, interrogate traditional narratives of disability, and invigorate our own canons, whatever they may be. Because I teach drama as well as disability and literature, the examples I shall offer will be tied to my own classroom, but at their base are methods that could be adapted beyond the borders of an English or theater classroom. The strategies I discern in Lewis (2006) provide me a language to discuss similar ones I have used for integrating disability, performance, and pedagogy, and I describe them as the following: a) criping the canon, b) criping the curriculum, c) enlisting your colleagues in performance, and d) creating alternative on-campus disability performances. Each of these strategies, informed by and illustrated with examples from my own experience from over the past decade as a disability studies scholar and teacher, represent opportunities to invigorate pedagogy and invest our work and campuses with disability culture and disability studies. Make no mistake, there are implications of these strategies to which I still do not have the answers, important potential fissures to consider with which I will close this essay. I offer these ideas, as well as the dilemmas, as a starting point for those who wish to incorporate disability studies into their own teaching, no matter what kind of institution or level of familiarity with the field. Within the small liberal arts college (Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina) that is my home institution, I have the advantage of being able to design courses that have a specific disability studies focus. But I do not presume that those reading this essay have such freedom. Therefore, some of these strategies can be implemented by those who perhaps do not have the ability, resources, or time to create a separate course.

### **Criping the Canon**

The educator who works from a disability studies perspective has to ask the same originating question as Lewis (2006) did in creating *Beyond Victims and Villains*: Who is not being heard historically, artistically, aesthetically, or theoretically, from a disability studies perspective? And just as importantly, how do we make the knowledge about and creative work of disabled people (including activists, educators, artists, scholars, and thinkers) available to our students within our classrooms? For me, that translated into the following question: Where could I locate the presence of disability into that which I was already teaching? As scholars

and educators, we understand that every discipline has a body of knowledge considered canonical. Borrowing Sandahl's (2003) language, the question for us is how to "crip" that body of knowledge, challenge the presumption that is set and unassailable, and seek out the literally and figuratively disabled directions it can take. Or to put it more plainly: How can we introduce disability as part of the identity of what we teach? "Crippling the canon" demands we recognize how disabled people have been important contributors to the content of our fields. It likewise demands we understand how disability might have been an integral part of how that knowledge was/is produced. Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (personal communication, January 15, 2009) has called this the "because of, not in spite of" way of thinking. How does disability shape knowledge and creation, rather than being that which production takes place "in spite of?"

One strategy is to educate ourselves about and be mindful of the contribution of disability culture to the content of our fields. For me, that translated into introducing plays from within disability culture into courses for which the addition they make would be significant. For example, within a course that is a survey of contemporary drama, I taught Lynn Manning's *Weights* (2003), a solo performance work that recounts how the African-American poet-performer, Manning, became blind and transitioned into his new life as a disabled person. Its presence importantly complicates and interrogates an understanding of both racial and disability identities by exploring their intersection through the popular theatrical genre of solo performance. Manning's work simultaneously satirizes and critiques the stereotypes and myths surrounding disability and black masculinity, but more so, points beyond them to those systems of the social construction of identity that produce them. His most pointed comment in this regard comes in "The Magic Wand," the closing poem he recites, which mulls over the divide others feel when trying to pigeonhole him as a black, blind man. Is he seen as, he wonders, "welfare-rich pimp" or "disability-rich gimp?" Ultimately, Manning (2003) observes, "my final form is never of my choosing. I only wield the wand [i.e., his cane]; you are the magicians."

Other plays similarly illuminate course ideas while reimagining them through a disability perspective. *Pyretown* (director?, 2006) was another a play I included in the contemporary drama course. An important work by Belluso (year?), it does what many other American plays

do: engages the insidious side of relentless American individualism. If such individualism and self-reliance undergirds the myth of American identity, then it is no wonder that disabled people, made dependant on others if not afforded their right to equal access and accommodation, have been shunted to the periphery of history. Belluso's (year?) particular exploration of that dilemma is made by considering the crisis in health care in a poor town that has been essentially abandoned when an HMO closes the only hospital. Two characters, Harry (a wheelchair user) and Louise (a single mother) fall in and out of love as they struggle to make a life in a society that presumes only the survival of the economically and physically fittest. Belluso's work, like that of August Wilson, Cherrie Moraga, or Suzan-Lori Parks, negotiates the particular contradictions contained within the myth of America for members of minority communities. Like Arthur Miller or Eugene O'Neill, Belluso shows how the complex bonds of love suffer real damage from the weight of expectation imposed in a capitalist, success-centered society. In another course on "Queer Performance And/As Activism," I introduced excerpts from the work of queer/disabled solo performer Greg Walloch (F\*\*k the Disabled) (citation?). Besides representing a particular kind of queer experience, including Walloch's (year?) work underscored that there are elements of the queer and disability experiences that can be likened and interrogated together, including passing and coming out.

To crip the canon might also mean crippling our rather canonical ways of reading, researching, and otherwise approaching and engaging an individual discipline, its core ideas and subject matter, introducing or framing them instead with a disability perspective. In dramatic literature classes, students learn to weigh the extent to which characterizations of disability approximate the moral or medical models. Students who, for example, might see the twisted body of the malevolent character Jacob Hummel as an innocuous example of August Strindberg's (1907) proto-expressionism in *The Ghost Sonata* (citation?) are encouraged to recognize that character as part of a pervasive lineage of literary archetypes in which twisted body equals twisted mind<sup>2</sup>.

2 The moral model of disability posits disability as an outer reflection of an inner moral state. Most commonly, that state is one of two extremes: extreme innocence or infamy (think of Charles Dickens' Tiny Tim vs. William Shakespeare's Richard III, for example). The medical model has largely displaced the moral model,

Besides recognizing and cataloguing such depictions, however, we need to further invite students to consider their implications. How might the projection of anxiety onto disability be seen as anticipating larger modern concerns about identity and its construction? For example, when I teach Henrik Ibsen's revolutionary 1879 play *A Doll's House* (citation?) in the context of a modern drama course, we spend time discussing the role of a character like the syphilitic Dr. Rank, and asking why illness needs to be visited on the body of this secondary character. We further consider why the intersection of disease and masculinity is so important to this play, given that the illness of three major figures (Nora's husband, father, and Dr. Rank) is necessary for Nora to practice her deception and become "empowered." Of what importance is it that Nora flirts with, and rejects, embracing an Ophelia-like insanity?

How, I further might ask in a contemporary drama class, do disabled bodies remain the locus for the projection of common cultural anxieties over 100 years later? For example, Alan Bennett's 2004 play *The History Boys* (citation?) has as its main character a teacher, named Irwin, who toward the end of the play finally voices his desire for one of the young men he has taught. Almost immediately, without anything having happened between them, he is in an accident that leaves him in a wheelchair. How, we might ask, does this play manifest its anxiety about the queer teacher's body by disabling that protagonist? Another teacher, Hector, who has made ineffectual advances to some of his students, was played in the original production by Richard Griffiths, an actor of size. Is it easier for a director, then, to direct antipathy at the character and signal his immorality because he is obese? But disability's meanings are difficult, if not impossible, to pin down. Is it possible our sympathy is elicited through the pathos of this outsize character, whom no one, it seems, could imagine desiring? In any case, the question becomes moot, given that this teacher is killed in that same motorcycle accident, the disabled/queered body erased in the tradition of all kinds of anxiety-inducing characters, from the tragic mulatto

and instead reads disability not as a marker of personality, but as pathology. In other words, disability is a problem located on the body of the impaired individual (not a societal problem or construction). The presumed desire of the sick person, and indeed the only desirable state, is to be cured. Otherwise, life is seen as at best a state of lack, and at worst, tragic and not worth living. The complexity of the actual lives lived in between the extremes of cure or kill remains unacknowledged.

to the inhabitants of the celluloid closet. Ironically, however, even in work that foregrounds the body as a more complex site of contested meanings, there can still be a paradoxical use of the disabled body; it can slip easily from allied to archetypal (and therefore usually stereotypical). In such classes, I invite my students to fully weigh how minority playwrights use disability to give voice to their political and social oppression, and ask what the implications of such depictions are.

### Crippling the Curriculum

*Beyond Victims and Villains* (Lewis, 2006) is able to posit new possibilities for an existing body of knowledge (e.g., how do we see the disability present in drama with which we are familiar?) But it also posits a new body of knowledge, inviting us to contemplate the question: What is the new disability drama, and why is it important to consider it for its own sake? Who are the important playwrights we need to know about, writers like Susan Nussbaum, John Belluso, and Lynn Manning? The collection's presence moves disabled writers into visibility, redefining the boundaries of contemporary and multicultural drama. For us as educators, that also means asking an analogous question about our own fields: What are the possibilities for new, disability-centered course design within the curricula of our disciplines? If opportunities for new course design are limited, what are the parameters of possibility for disability design within the context of what we already teach? And how can disability add new ways of defining knowledge?

For me, such opportunities have presented themselves in a number of venues. For example, I have designed two new courses for the English department at Davidson that are specifically disability studies-focused: a survey of disability and literature, as well as a senior-level seminar on representations of disability in twentieth-century American drama. The disability and literature course, now in its third incarnation, evolved in a way that reflects the unfolding complexity of disability studies in the humanities. Initially, I started with a course that was a chronological survey that started with Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (citation) and concluded with Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (citation). In revising the course, I elected to move it away from a survey to an issues-based approach that reflected emerging questions being raised in the study of disability studies and literature. The version I teach now orients itself around different theoretical questions. For example, one week

we might examine the social construction of disability; another week, we might look at how disability studies scholars have more recently queried the problematic elements of that construction. In considering critical questions shaped by disability theory (including important contemporary critical concepts such as “the stare,” narrative prosthesis, and compulsory ablebodiedness), we were able to contemplate better what ideas about disability might have emerged from the interactions of authors and their audiences.

My own research on the presence of disability in American drama led me to develop a course on “Disability and American Drama,” a course that broadened and complemented the teaching of drama I already did within my home department through courses on feminist, queer, and multicultural drama. That senior-level survey allowed for the close re-examination of the representation of the image of disability. In the course, we considered how disability limped, hobbled, and rolled its way onto the stage from the earliest days of American drama, including its omnipresence during nineteenth-century melodrama as marker of innocence and infamy. The premise of the course was that disability was integral to drama’s evolving role throughout that century in reflecting anxiety and excitement over cultural shifts involving gender, race, sexuality, and class. Disability’s presence in an increasingly socially conscious drama went beyond its usual role as mere metaphor for moral fortitude or failure, beyond its usual treatment as only medical pathology. Dramatic representations of disability across the century also prefigured today’s playwriting from within disability culture, establishing a nascent “disability aesthetic” of drama.

I also have adapted courses I already teach with a disability studies emphasis. I teach a section of freshman composition every year; four different semesters, I have designed the course to have a disability studies core, titling it “Extraordinary Bodies.” The course emphasizes writing and research tasks Davidson students need, but also integrates that with an introduction to the history of disability, an understanding of disability activism, and a primer on disability culture. The course encourages students to rethink their own encounters with the performance of disability. This leads to fascinating stories of all kinds, ranging from students used to inspirational models, to students who have had disabled members of their families and never understood how to define their experience as strong and worthwhile. An introduction to literary analysis class that I regularly teach

introduces students to different schools of theoretical thought. I regularly include disability studies as one of the approaches to literary criticism I deem essential for students to learn. The trick to “cripping the curriculum,” then, is not to get caught up in thinking you will need to utterly transform the knowledge of your field, but rather, perhaps see it anew. What are the ways disability might be “hiding in plain sight” in your field, and how can you as an educator underscore them for yourself and your students?

What never ceases to amaze me is how quickly students turn into resources for new disability performances, continually connecting me to sources, stories, and connections from their classes and popular culture interests. It is a truism of disability studies that once you begin to think about it, disability starts to appear everywhere you look. It has been no less true in these classes. Students, for example, express amazement that they have never noticed disability tropes in favorite works. One student, for example, in my senior-level Disability and Literature class was shocked to realize how completely she had missed the images of disability that permeate Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* (citation), even though she had read the work three times. In no other subject have I had the sheer range of students maintain interest in a subject once beyond the walls of my classroom. Whether sending me a recent news story on disability, an image of disability art, or seeking my advice about their own disability-related project, students have remained “infected” in a way that suggests they are exploding their own canons of knowledge in the fields and disciplines they enter. The liberatory potential of cripdom appeals in part because the once unknown is becoming known, but also, I think, because they understand the revolutionary potential of that act of crippling their own understanding.

### **Enlisting Your Colleagues in the Performance of Disability**

Part of the purpose of a work like *Beyond Victims and Villains* (Lewis, 2006) is to present resources, inviting others to embody disability on stage by offering the literal scripts with which to do it. As educators, we can adopt a similar strategy: What are the ways we can invite others to engage with a real, palpable performance of disability? So often, the performance of disability at our home institutions is as limited as its historical stage representation. Disability is the “problem” that

must be accommodated with extra time or an extended deadline; it is the object of charity, the subject of students' fundraising efforts; or, it is disembodied altogether (for example, it might be part of an ethics or a science class, but not looked at as a socially constructed identity, culture with its own history to be studied, or embodied existence that has pleasure as much as pain). The disability studies educator, even the one who may not be able to create complete classes on disability studies, can still enlist colleagues and students in counteracting these traditional performances, substituting them with alternative views of disability. This can be done through actively seeking out opportunities to make others see the presence of a very different definition of disability within their own subject areas.

What are some of the ways I have done this at my home institution? Because my liberal arts college has a relatively small faculty, I've been able to make colleagues in other departments aware of what I do as a disability studies scholar. This has led to opportunities to guest teach in other colleagues' classes and link issues and ideas in those courses to a disability studies approach. Some of these performances have taken the following shape:

1. A colleague teaches a first-year composition course on the cultural history and social meanings of toys. For one class session, I took my own collection of disability toys over to the class for a "show-and-tell." These toys range from Fisher-Price Rescue Heroes (with laser-equipped wheelchairs) to X-Men Professor X figures (also in a tricked-out wheelchair) to disability Barbies (both "Sign Language Teacher Barbie" and three different incarnations of "Becky," Barbie's disabled friend). The toys enabled me to speak about the intersection of gender and disability (all the toys seem to overcompensate for supposedly weakened masculinity or femininity as a result of disability). They also allowed me to scrutinize, with the students, evolving narratives about disability (for example, disability Becky's incarnations that move from sentimental poster child to overcoming supercrip).
2. I have visited classes as wide-ranging as a political science course on the "American Dream" and a senior-level musicology seminar. In the former, I spoke about the impact of the myth

of individualism on the disabled person. In the latter, I had an exchange with musicologist and disability studies scholar Neil Lerner about the presence of disability in music history and musical composition.

3. As a result of a collaboration with our on-campus art gallery, in 2009, I co-curated two exhibitions at Davidson entitled *RE/FORMATIONS: DISABILITY, WOMEN AND SCULPTURE* and *STARING*. I gave tours of the exhibitions to widely varying class communities. For example, for *RE/FORMATIONS*, I spoke to groups of students from a biology class on genetics and an English literature class on literature and medicine. I was able to speak with the students about the implications that the representation of disability in the art exhibit had for the kind of scholarly and scientific work they themselves were doing. In both exhibits, students were also able to see theoretical and scholarly ideas about the construction of gender and the body translated through a visual medium, making those concepts more widely public and accessible.

Once invited to see the presence of disability within their own disciplines, I have found my colleagues themselves have found a wide range of ways to engage disability. Some have mentioned to me plans to create their own disability-related projects. Others (one in the social sciences, and one in the natural sciences) have discussed with me the possibility of team teaching courses in disability across our fields. Colleagues within my department have worked with students on honors theses that have taken a disability-studies related focus. Colleagues in the arts have discussed with me the implications of disability for training and performance. My point here is that a disability presence quickly manifests itself exponentially, once others are invited to see how it is at the heart of their own work.

### **Creating Alternative On-Campus Performances of Disability**

It is not uncommon for me to get the following suggestion, at the end of a semester-long disability studies course, on evaluations or from students directly: Why not have exercises akin to those "sensitivity training" ones that simulate blindness for a day, or being a wheelchair user? I find it an interesting and reasonable

question. After a semester of attuning themselves to disability history, politics, culture, and representation, the mostly nondisabled students who take my courses feel a sense of urgency, and a desire to make the disability experience more material for themselves and others. And yet, I refuse to do such exercises (for reasons that are familiar and debated within the disability studies community) because they cannot approximate the experience of having lived with a disability beyond the one day of the exercise. These exercises deny the wide-ranging and fluid nature of disability as an identity, and they emphasize disability as a pitiable, tragic, and difficult position, completely removing any possibility that power or pleasure could exist as part of disability identity as well. They also do not address the fact that ableism can take on subtler, more multivariied forms than lack of access. How, for example, do such exercises challenge the beliefs of students or professors who believe extra time on tests or papers to accommodate learning disabilities amounts only to “special treatment” at best, or a “disability con” at worst? And yet, performance is a powerful thing. Where can we enter into the void between charity fundraisers and crip-for-a-day exercises? *Beyond Victims and Villains* (Lewis, 2006) deploys multiple performances to complicate and shift the stage representation of disability. But how can we create opportunities beyond the classroom for students to perform disability in a new and wider variety of ways on our campuses?

One way to do this is through using extant campus speaking series and public lecture funding opportunities to feature disability-related topics. This is easier than it sounds. Disability is so intertwined with culture and history, that topics already of interest and relevance to intellectual communities almost invariably are interconnected with disability in some ways. We can ask ourselves: What might such opportunities to highlight the disability aspect of an important historical or cultural moment be? For example, Simi Linton, a writer, scholar, disability arts consultant and activist, brought the 1999 documentary film *Liebe Perla* to Davidson’s campus for a screening and discussion. The film, which documents the search for evidence of how the short-statured members of a Jewish family had been victimized by Josef Mengele, is a powerful historicization of how disabled people were among the first victims of the Holocaust. On a campus where the literature and history of the Holocaust are already taught, this film was an important reminder to remember those who were among its first victims.

The Anarcha Project, a research and performance collective, represents another opportunity for interconnection, this time between history, ethnic studies, women’s studies, and disability studies. I brought this performance collective to Davidson for a week-long residency. Made up of scholars and artists, it purports to revive and recreate the stories of three slave women on whose bodies the “father of modern gynecology,” J. Marion Sims, performed experimentation in the name of medical advancement. Through questioning the construction of medical and racial history, the Anarcha Project adds its counternarrative to medical history, one that questions the very nature of archiving and epistemology itself. What does it mean to reconceptualize, through disability, how we create and archive knowledge in the classroom and beyond? When the members of the Project came to campus, they spoke to English literature and political science classes about the nature of their research, and how they were attempting to resuscitate the reality of these women’s lives and pain. Working within the framework of an extant script, they conducted performance workshops, in which Davidson students were invited to embody the stories of Betsy, Lucy, and Anarcha, investigating what it meant to recount disability history (and rewrite American history) through dance and movement.

The Anarcha Project and *Liebe Perla* further suggest the rich possibilities inherent in using on-campus arts events to showcase disability culture and create a dialogue within a community. For example, I brought Joan Lipkin, founder and director of *The Disability Project* in St. Louis, to lead an artistic residency and make a community-based theater similar to that she creates in her own community. She worked for a week to make a performance piece addressing issues of disability at Davidson College; the subject matter and performers both came from the Davidson student body. Petra Kuppers and Johnson Cheu both shared their own work as disabled poets, reading work for Davidson audiences that moved disability imagery out of the old metaphors and into new expressions of embodiment. Perhaps the most exciting example of the new disability arts that found an expression on the Davidson campus were the two 2009 exhibitions in Davidson’s Van Every/Smith art galleries entitled *RE/FORMATIONS: DISABILITY, WOMEN, AND SCULPTURE* and *STARING*. These were the culmination of a year and a half of collaboration between myself and Jessica Cooley, assistant gallery director, as co-curators. Together, we worked

across the disciplinary boundaries of art and literary study to create art exhibits that examined disability as a cultural identity. In the case of *RE/FORMATIONS*, we examined in particular what it meant when female and disability identities intersected<sup>3</sup>. These identities, while not identical, hold so much in common. Women and the disabled have been relegated to secondary status in society, cast as those excessive and unruly bodies against which the normate defines itself. The exhibit contained both sculptures and installations by turns contemplative and confrontational, and explored a number of questions: What is the new disability art? How can art make material the disability experience? If an artist's mobility or intentionality do not match what we think of as "typical," what possibilities does that open up for invigorating how we understand art itself? In the case of *STARING*, we built on the theoretical ideas expressed by feminist disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her 2009 book, *Staring: How We Look*. Garland-Thomson (2009) avers that staring is an opportunity for starrer and staree to connect across difference. We included in the exhibition works by visual artists such as Doug Auld and Chris Rush, whose images Thomson posits model this kind of opportunity. We also drew works from the Davidson permanent collection, including works by canonical artists such as Goya, Hogarth, and Rembrandt. This time, however, they were featured as part of a visual discussion of a theoretical concept (i.e., "the stare"). Disability became public in that exhibit in multiple ways: Through the invitation to re-see works we already had through a new critical lens, and through this visual expression of what has been so importantly theorized and argued by Garland-Thomson (2009).

### A Closing Strategy: No Closure

The strategies outlined here for creating disability pedagogy as suggested by the aesthetics, format, philosophy, and impact of *Beyond Victims and Villains* (Lewis, 2006) are ones I have found sustaining and continually surprising. And yet, performance is necessarily ephemeral, incomplete, and finite by its very nature. Not surprisingly then, these various methods of performing disability still leave room for questions, complications, and inconsistencies. If disability studies is premised on the denial of the normate as a force to contain, define,

and quantify, then it seems appropriate that I leave this list of strategies open-ended. The process of establishing disability studies on any campus is necessarily an ongoing one particular to that community. Therefore, I would like to close by *resisting* closure, suggesting questions and complications that have arisen as I have engaged these strategies. Disability studies remains a subject that causes people discomfort, for a variety of reasons: boundaries between disabled/nondisabled identities are called into question; stigma is a powerful force; many people lack exposure to disability; and even once people become attuned to disability, there can be an uncertainty on their part of what to do next. But ultimately, I think these uncertainties are a sign of the productive discomfort disability studies can create in our own educational communities.

For example, anyone who does disability studies, with the exception of a very few employed at schools with such programs, will most likely be the only one (or one of a small number) doing such work on their campus. In one sense, this is not at all different from having an academic specialty. But where it is different is that disability is also an issue of diversity and accommodation on our campuses, not simply an academic issue. Often, I find myself being contacted by faculty or staff needing advice on providing accommodation. Becoming a "go to" person on disability has promising and problematic political implications. It has allowed me to advocate or offer advice when I can, and has certainly changed my viewpoint, making me see from a disability perspective what salient issues for disabled Davidson students might be, ones that I as a nondisabled person might never have expected or anticipated otherwise. However, it is a reminder of the fact that disability is still thought of as monolithic; what might be an answer in one situation might not be in another. I cannot claim to speak for disability culture, let alone represent/inform all possible contingencies. I have realized it is important to admit when I do not know something, not so much to let myself off the hook, but to force the institution to shift and locate that knowledge in useful ways.

Indeed, as a nondisabled scholar who is very much a participant in disability culture and an ally of disability activism, my own embodiment further poses questions that are important to consider. As a nondisabled person, what risks do I run in teaching disability studies? What, exactly, is the nature of my performance? What does it mean to implicitly speak for disability culture as a disability studies educator? Am I a member of disability

3 To see the online exhibition catalogue for *Re/Formations: Women, Disability, and Sculpture*, go to [www.davidson.edu/reformations](http://www.davidson.edu/reformations).

culture? Where might I be falling into paternalistic traps of my own? It is important to feel good, and rightly so, about students you have connected to disability culture. I am very proud, for example, that some of our students formed a disabled student group. However, I have learned that an important part of countering paternalism is recognizing that sometimes disabled students will not embrace disability culture or identity. For me, that is akin to my own late arrival to feminism, a term I would never have embraced at my students' age. What is sometimes more difficult is being confronted with a student who embraces a kind of contradictory consciousness. While I have worked with students who have embraced fierce crip pride, I have worked with others who, while intellectually understanding passing and overcoming metaphors, still actively replicate ableist structures in their own life and work, in essence playing the "good crip." It is hard to fault them, since this kind of subject position is still heavily rewarded in society. I also cannot know the full circumstances of any one person's life or sense of their own disability identity. What I can do is realize that advocacy and education is larger than any single student. Some are ready for these conversations, others are not quite there yet (but hopefully may be one day). The late disability rights activist Harriet McBryde Johnson (year?), in her memoir *Too Late to Die Young*, acknowledges this difficulty, yet emphasizes the importance of sharing community with those who are ready, of preaching to the converted in the ways that we can.

What is perhaps most exciting for me is that I am continually having conversations about disability on my campus with students, staff, and colleagues. Disability is, after all, an identity that touches everyone, and if we are nondisabled, one we will all enter if we live long enough. The meaning of disability remains amorphous and undefined enough in our society that sometimes well-meaning others mistake my work for an interest in rehabilitation, charity, or sentimentality. But to me, such mistakes become opportunities to bridge the medical and moral models with disability culture and its much more real, multivaried, and wonderful world. My purpose with all these strategies, then, is ultimately to blur the divide between disabled and nondisabled, to multistream rather than mainstream, to complicate that binary rather than eradicate differences in some kind of elusive or illusory search for "universals." What lies beyond victimhood and villainy, after all, are vitality and invigoration. Re-reading the representation of disability

can posit fresh and exciting new ways to understand how our own views of the world are constructed, an understanding that can have empowering implications for bodies of all kinds: "victims," "villains," and the more realistic, lived subject positions in between.

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## About the Author

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# Professional Perspective

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Zola's *Missing Pieces* (1982). Did I, he teased, ever stop working? I objected that it was not really work. I was a practitioner, not a scholar. "Work" reading was practical, perhaps something about organizing interpreter services or grant writing. *Missing Pieces* was not the sort of thing I should read on company time. I didn't fully believe that at the time, but my response was instinctual.

Disability studies was a nascent field that seemed to have little overlap with disabled student services professionals. That overlap is much greater now, and Ann M. Fox's *How to Crip the Undergraduate Classroom: Lessons from Performance, Pedagogy, and Possibility* (2010) is a delightful springboard for thought about how disability studies, disability services on campus, and students can reinforce one another. Professor Fox outlines four strategies that disability studies scholars in any discipline might employ to ". . . incorporate disability studies into their campus community life inside and outside of the classroom . . ." (p. 38). She terms this "cripping" the classroom, and goes on to describe crippling the curriculum, the campus environment, and even the students themselves<sup>1</sup>. I offer observations relevant to my work serving disabled students and advocating for an inclusive campus . . .

1. **Disabled Student Services (DSS) professionals can greatly benefit from staying connected with disability studies and using it to inform our work.** Especially in her discussion of "cripping," Fox notes the importance of turning dominant-paradigm thinking about disability on its ear, in a manner that (quoting C. Sandahl) "'spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects . . . [and to] expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications

<sup>1</sup> On page 38, Fox ably defines the "crip" noun and verb terminology, in the context of honoring and incorporating disability aspects in environments and the learning experience of her students – hence, "cripping the classroom." Disability Services professionals will need to carefully analyze, perhaps even strategize, the circumstances and contexts in which we might consider using such powerful terminology, and we should carefully gauge our audiences' readiness as well as our own authorities for using it.

of attempts to homogenize humanity . . ." (p. 38). This is but one example of how we can use the fruits of disability studies as we contextualize our own work and strategize change.

2. **DSS professionals are well-poised to supplement students' disability studies education.** This is consistent with the "student development" underpinnings of most modern student services in higher education. We often have the most interpersonal and disability-specific interactions with students and, with some, the best opportunities to engage them as they consider their identities as disabled people in ablist societies. These interactions help us think through our roles too, as we learn from the students and mutually ". . . understand the revolutionary potential of crippling [our] own understanding" (p.).
3. **In a similar vein, students with disabilities who are themselves engaged in disability studies can be powerful agents for change.** It is often they—not we—who can most quickly and powerfully influence change amongst the faculty. Their common disability studies endeavors can help strengthen cohesiveness without compromising individuality.
4. **Disability studies helps us consider roles and issues for the many nondisabled DSS personnel on campuses.** To paraphrase the questions that Fox poses for herself:

As a nondisabled person, what risks do I run in my work? What, exactly, is the nature of my role? What does it mean to implicitly speak for disability culture/issues as a professional in the field? Am I a member of disability culture? Where might I be falling into paternalistic traps of my own? (p. 46)

And yes, I now would urge DSS professionals to read Zola's *Missing Pieces*!

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