

Disability Faculty Seminar Proposal
10 hour-long sessions

Rationale

Contemporary approaches to disability fundamentally examine the nature, meaning, and consequences of the norms, expectations and experiences surrounding disability and ability. Integrating social, political, cultural, educational, medical and legal models, contemporary disability scholarship fundamentally approaches disability as a historically and geopolitically specific social category that shifts meaning over time and space. In addition to medical and legal approaches, the emerging field of disability studies draws upon and expands new social movement, socioeconomic justice, critical race, feminist, and queer paradigms to critically explore what is considered a *disability* and the ramifications of that designation. It not only addresses disability as a bodily condition and identity through which opportunities and inequality are distributed, but as an analytic frame to examine the presumed norms underlying dominant understanding of ability, the historical and institutional roots of these norms, and their lived consequences.

Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to disability grapple with tensions between therapeutic, medical and legal approaches on the one hand and social and activist definitions on the other. These tensions generate rich scholarly engagements that this Faculty Seminar will explore. We are particularly interested in how health, medical and scientific perspectives approach disability in the 21st century. How do these fields understand the interaction between genetic, developmental, environmental and social factors shaping disabilities? In turn, how do these interactions inform accommodations and treatment? In the humanities, scholarly engagements include cultural and visual histories mapping the evolving meanings attached to disability (Berger 2014; Davis 1995/2000, 2013, 2015; Garland-Thomson 1997, 2009; Seibers 2010). Sociologists have investigated how attention to disability reorganizes existing understandings of individualism, dependency and care (Ginsberg 1999; Feder-Kittay, 1999), as well as the impact of new genetic testing upon these relationships (Berubé 2013; Rapp 1999; Hubbard 2006). Due to a shared interest in exploring how dominant power relations shaped lived, embodied experience, recent interdisciplinary scholarship also knits together feminist (Garland-Thomson 2012; Hall 2011), queer (Kafer 2013; McRuer 2006; McRuer and Mollows 2012), critical race (Samuels 2014) and postcolonial perspectives (Kim 2008). Interdisciplinary approaches have also explored the tensions generated by legal and medical models that demand framing disability as a nonnormative bodily experience to pave the way for access to basic health and employment opportunities (Emens 2013; Davis 2015; Spade 2001, 2011; Satz Forthcoming, 2013, 2010). Writers, artists, and performers use the arts to explore both lived experiences with disability, while also imagining alternative modes of intervention (Claire 1999/2009, In Progress; Fries 1997; Forney 2012; Mairs 1997; Shannon; Solomon 2015).

This Faculty Seminar proposes to explore these key debates and tensions. Desired topics include: contemporary scientific and medical approaches; policy; invisible disabilities, including mental illness, anxiety, and concussions; culture and representation; intersectionality; universal design and the built environment; eugenics; and artistic engagements. The United States is currently celebrating the Americans with Disabilities Act's (ADA) 25th anniversary, and a key topic we would like to explore is the social and political history of the ADA, as well as its future. Because disability studies emerged from humanities based-inquiry on the one hand and therapeutic models on the other, we would like to explore the cultural and representational landscape surrounding understandings of ability. Although disability is most often conceptualized as physical or cognitive impairment, there is increasing attention to "invisible

disabilities” that range from learning disabilities to psychopathology and mental health. Current discussions explore the possibilities and ramifications of including anxiety and depression within the medical, social and legal lexicon of disability, as well the sociolegal implications of approaching obesity or concussions as disabilities.

Both ability and disability are co-constituted in relationship to structures of race, gender, class, and sexuality, as well as categories that transcend existing models of difference such as age and citizenship status. If intersectional analysis fundamentally examines the interlocking systems of power through which institutional and representational forces channel resources and recognitions towards some groups and not others, then exploring contemporary discussions around the built environment and material culture will allow us to more closely assess the institutional forces that convert forms of impairment to socio-politically produced forms of disability. If new technologies and medical interventions help prevent disability through genetic testing or mitigate it, then what are the social consequences of these new practices? In what spaces do these practices respond to the everyday bodily and social needs of individuals and in what ways might they function as a new form of eugenics, as some scholars have emphasized (Hubbard 1996; Rapp 1999). Disability activists and artists in particular explore the meanings that generate from these tensions, with some arguing that it is essential to attend to both (see particularly Clare 1999; Forthcoming).

The Disability Seminar Faculty would like to complement our scholarly inquiries into the built environment and intersectionality with a workshop exploring how universal design principles can expand our pedagogical techniques for students of a range of learning styles, irrespective of whether they qualify for accommodations. Artists are uniquely using visual, literary and performance-based mediums to explore the social and political meanings of a range of abilities, and we would like to study their approaches as we grapple with how to reimagine existing understandings of disability.

Our preliminary readings and potential speakers will address these guiding topics and questions. Potential presenters are indicated with bolding:

- **Lennard J. Davis** will help explore the history of the ADA and its 21st century future. A Professor English, Disability & Human Development and Medical Education at the University of Illinois, Chicago, he is one of the foremost scholars in disability studies. His prolific publications include literary, historical, creative and sociomedical contributions, among them *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era* (Michigan UP; 2013) and *Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest US Minority its Rights* (Beacon Press; 2015). He is also director of [Project Biocultures](http://www.projectbiocultures.com), a think-tank devoted to issues around the intersection of culture, medicine, disability, biotechnology, and the biosphere. See <http://www.lennarddavis.com>.
- **Manju Banerjee's** work will help guide our exploration of invisible disabilities, mental health and psychopathology. Dr. Banerjee is an Associate Professor and Vice President for Educational Research and Innovation at Landmark College's Institute for Research and Training. She has over 28 years of experience in the field of learning disabilities, ADHD, and postsecondary education, and is a certified diagnostician and teacher-consultant on learning disabilities. She has published and presented extensively, both nationally and internationally, on topics such as Universal Design for Instruction, disability documentation and accommodations, and technological competencies for postsecondary transition and online learning. She was Co-PI of \$1.03 million U.S. Dept.

of Education demonstration project grant (#P333A080053) on “UDI Online: Applying Universal Design for Instruction to Online and Blended Courses” awarded in 2008 and completed in 2012. She currently teaches a graduate level course on Universal Design: Principles and Practice. She is an editorial board member of the Journal of Postsecondary Education Disability, Professional Advisory Board member to the Learning Disability Association of America, and a consultant to Educational Testing Service. She received her doctoral degree from the Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, on the application of Universal Design to assessment practices. See more at: <http://www.landmark.edu/institute/meet-the-institute/#sthash.G14BoacJ.dpuf>

- Scott Stossel’s scholarship will also help us explore questions of invisible disabilities, building on both faculty and student interests in the role of mental health, anxiety, depression and a range of conditions like obesity and concussion that are increasingly approached as a form of disability. An editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, he published *My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread and the Search for Peace of Mind* (Knopf; 2013).
- **Rosemarie Garland-Thomson** will discuss how disability has been framed in culture. Along with Lennard Davis, she is a founding member of disability studies. She is a Professor of English and Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Emory University, where her fields of study are disability studies, American literature and culture, feminist theory, and bioethics. Her work develops the field of critical disability studies in the health humanities, broadly understood, to bring forward disability access, inclusion and identity to communities inside and outside of the academy. She is the author of *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford UP, 2009) and several other books. Her current book project is *Habitable Worlds: Disability, Technology, and Eugenics*.
- **Ellen Samuels or Susan Birch** will explore intersectional processes and alignments between disability studies and other modes of difference, whether they are embedded in body-based frameworks of identity, or in behaviors and categories that stretch beyond them.
 - An Associate Professor of American Studies at Middlebury College, Susan Burch is working on the intersection between disability studies and native American Studies. Research and teaching subjects “at the margins” draws Burch’s attention, and particularly the historical impact of race, ethnicity, disability, gender, and material culture on lived experiences in America, Russia, and beyond. Her publications include *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson* (UNC UP; 2007) and *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1990-World War II* (NYU UP; 2002). For more details about her work see her [CV](#) and a [sample of her publications](#).
 - Ellen Samuels works at the intersections of feminist, queer, and disability theory. An Associate Professor of English and Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies her research interests include 19th and 20th century American literature; disability studies; feminist/queer theory and gender studies; African American literature; body theory; cultural studies; creative writing; autobiography and memoir. Her publications have won numerous awards, including the Catharine Stimpson Award for outstanding feminist scholarship due to “‘A Complication of Complaints’: Untangling Disability, Race, and Gender

in William and Ellen Craft's *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom.*" *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States*. 31.3, Fall, 2006: 15-47. She is also the author of *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender and Race* (NYU Press, 2014). See <http://womenstudies.wisc.edu/professional-pages/samuels>.

- **Patricia Ralabate, PhD**, will be helping us navigate the relationship between universal design, built environment and material culture. With almost 30 years of experience in the educational field: as a practitioner, policy analyst, and advocate for all students, Dr. Ralabate brings a wealth of experience and expertise to this postdoctoral fellowship position. As a senior policy analyst at the National Education Association (NEA) in Washington, DC, Patricia Ralabate has built collaborative relationships with 50 state affiliates to help build partnerships among national educational and disability groups, represents the NEA on various national coalitions and advisory boards, developed and presented workshops on UDL as not only a philosophy to help students with special needs, but for all students, as well as other roles and responsibilities. She has been a leading force behind the establishment of a National UDL Task Force and co-chairs its communications committee. At CAST and Boston College, Dr. Ralabate will focus on creating additional resources to provide educational supports for implementation of UDL on both a practical and policy level to bridge the gap between special education and general education. The Seminar participants would like to pair this speaker with a student panel on extraordinary learning abilities as well as a workshop sponsored by OID on teaching methods and universal design.
- Another possibility to explore material culture is [Sara Hendren](#), an artist, design researcher, and assistant professor of design at Olin College. She makes material art and design works, writes, and lectures on adaptive and assistive technologies, prosthetics, inclusive design, accessible architecture, and related ideas. Her work has been exhibited in the US and abroad and is held in the permanent collection at MOMA (NYC), and her writing and design work have appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *The Atlantic Tech*, *FastCo Design*, and on National Public Radio (US), among others. She teaches socially engaged design practices, adaptive and assistive technology design, and disability studies for engineers-in-training in her role as assistant professor at [Olin College](#). She writes and edits [Abler](#).
- We would like to bring in a **performer or artist**. Suggestions include Nancy Mairs, who wrote a memoir *Waist High in the World: A life Among the Non-Disabled* (Beacon; 1997) about her experience with Multiple Sclerosis. Bill Shannon is a performance artist who uses dance to explore the significance of viewing disability as an extraordinary ability rather than a limitation, see <http://www.whatiswhat.com>. And Eli Claire is a memoirist, storyteller and poet whose work explores the intersections of disability with environmentalism and the intersections of queer, trans, rural and racialized experience. His books include *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation* (1999/2009), *The Marrow's Telling* (2007), and a forthcoming project currently titled *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Duke UP). See <http://eliclare.com/>.

Names of administrators and faculty interested:

Sharon O'Brien, Katie Oliviero, Dan Schubert, Elizabeth Lee, Suman Ambwani, Marni Jones, Claire Seiler.