

Introducing White Disability Studies

A Modest Proposal

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My modest proposal is inspired by a popular television program airing on the Chicago PBS affiliate. “Check, Please!” gathers three “ordinary” residents who, after selecting their favorite restaurant, anonymously dine at all three establishments, then gather in a studio to debate the relative merits and shortfalls of each culinary venue. During one episode, the trio included a self-styled *bon vivant* whom I will call Dorian Gray. Dorian, while sharing his observations about a Chinese restaurant in a south Chicago suburb, expressed his unadulterated amazement at the composition of one particular entrée. “The shrimp were *artificial!*” he bemoaned, dread contorting his facial features into an expression of unrecoverable distress. The individual selecting said restaurant as his favorite—I’ll call him Bubba Gump—blinked nary an eye at this revelation. Instead, Bubba stoically intoned, “If it looks like a shrimp, and it smells and tastes like a shrimp, it’s a shrimp.”

Bubba Gump’s matter-of-fact rejoinder to Dorian Gray is, I think, indicative of the whiteness of Disability Studies in its present incarnation. The fact that Disability Studies is marketed as such when it is in actuality an artificial (read: limited and limiting) version of the field does nothing to prevent it from being understood as Disability Studies, which is what Bubba, by extension, apprised Dorian of. I contend that it is disingenuous to keep up the pretense that the field is an inclusive one when it is not. On that score, I would like to concede the failure of Disability Studies to engage issues of race and ethnicity in a substantive capacity, thereby entrenching whiteness as its constitutive underpinning. In short, I want to call a shrimp a shrimp and acknowledge Disability Studies for what it is, White Disability Studies.

In contradistinction to Disability Studies, White Disability Studies recognizes its tendency to whitewash disability history, ontology and phenomenology. White Disability Studies, while not wholeheartedly excluding people of color from its critique,¹ by and large focuses on the work of white individuals and is itself largely produced by a corps of white scholars and activists. White Disability Studies envisions nothing ill-advised with this leaning because it is innocently done and far too difficult to remedy. A synoptic review of some of the literature and related aspects of Disability Studies bears this out.

“Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back”

This documentary was filmed during a conference on Disability and the Arts on the campus of the University of Michigan. The film is distressing because of its absence of non-white individuals. Given the absence of people of color, I suggest that a significant number of myths and misconceptions about who/what is constitutive of disability or “crip” culture are bolstered and reinforced in the film.

No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement

In his introduction, author Joseph Shapiro refers to the disabled community as the largest minority community in the United States, with more members than communities tallied by race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation amongst other socially-constructed identity categories(7). What interests me is Shapiro's obfuscation of divisions within this ostensibly-largest minority community and his insinuation that the disabled community is a monolithic one, struggling against the same oppressors, striving for identical degrees of dignity, recognition and cultural representation. Such a characterization is a limited one that does not consider or address the rich diversity within disability communities—racial and ethnic diversity, for example.

A Matter of Dignity: Changing the Lives of the Disabled

Comprised of a series of interviews with disabled people from various life strata, the dearth of people of color in the text is as undeniable as it is flagrant. In order to prevent this text from surprising the unexpected reader, it might be a good idea to acknowledge that whiteness is positioned as its center. Doing so would make for a much more accurate description of who/what is represented.

Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity

In her well-known text, Simi Linton describes Disability Studies by stating, "The field explores the critical divisions our society makes in creating the normal versus the pathological, the insider versus the outsider, or the competent citizen versus the ward of the state"(2). The reader should recognize the dichotomous line of thought here, the binary fashion with which Linton makes her critique. At the very least, it should be understood that many white disabled people have cultural capital by virtue of their race and are, therefore, more on the inside than they are on the outside. As an insider, Linton appears unaware of her positioning, and it is that unawareness that is one of the hallmarks of White Disability Studies.

Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body

Throughout this text, Davis takes whiteness as a norm. From his discussion of the desirability of the Venus de Milo to his examination of the protagonist in "Born on the Fourth of July," Davis's emphasis on whiteness is undeniable. There is, to be sure, nothing wrong with this focus (aside from being egregiously misleading with regard to which communities and subjectivities are constitutive of "disability"). I only wish Davis had broadened his source materials, or at the very least opted for a more accurate title e.g., *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the White Body*. Moreover, it matters that an excerpt from this text is reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of Literary Criticism*, the ostensible Bible of literary studies. Those readers coming across this excerpt will necessarily receive a distorted view of Disability Studies as a result of Davis's focus on whiteness.

Queer Disability Conference

Near the conclusion of the first day of this conference that convened in San Francisco in June 2002, I met with approximately thirteen other self-identified queer and disabled people of color during a caucus session. Our conversation focused on our individual and collective sense of exclusion based on race and ethnicity.² We could not fathom how the conference organizers—every one of them a

white person—could publicize this conference in numerous international contexts and venues—drawing participants from Finland, Australia, and the United Kingdom among other nations—but fail to devise and implement an outreach plan that would attract people of color and other marginalized groups within the queer and disabled communities in the local Bay Area. We also could not understand the overarching mentality of many of the attendees, perhaps best expressed by a remark made in a breakout session: “Being disabled is just like being black, so society should stop hating us and give us our rights.”

Society for Disability Studies Annual Conference, 2005

During the business meeting at the conference’s conclusion, the people of color caucus presented a list of action items to the membership in an effort to shore up the marginal presence race and ethnicity had at the conference (despite the fact that the conference was themed “Conversations and Connections Across Race and Disability”). Although the hour-long conversation that ensued was collegial and productive, I cannot help wondering, drawing on my experience at the Queer Disability Conference,³ how many times these questions of inclusion and exclusion have to be raised by people of color to white individuals? As I averred during the business meeting, “I’m tired of being one of the few to point out what should be obvious.”

Modern Language Association (MLA) Conference on Disability Studies and the University

Convened on the campus of Emory University March 5–7, 2004, the conference is notable at the outset for the sheer whiteness of those who presented. A quick glance down the list of presenters (as published in *PMLA* in 2005)⁴ bears this out. An additional concern is the content of what was shared during this conference.

In his address, “Disability: The Next Wave or Twilight of the Gods?” Lennard Davis, thankfully, speaks to the white nature of Disability Studies: “Disability studies has by and large been carried out by white people” (530). He is grossly incorrect, however, in the follow-up assertion that the field will benefit from “the disability studies book about the African American experience of disability” (*ibid.*). To be sure, there is no singular, structuralist African American experience of disability and it is imprudent to advocate for one. Davis is further incorrect when he insists that said text must incorporate the recent “post-race” debate. Placing strictures on a text is foolish, especially when the strictures themselves lack intellectual value and integrity.⁵

In “What Is Disability Studies?,” Simi Linton includes an instructive albeit telling example to illustrate the difficulty of answering the titular question:

A few years ago, a controversy about the golfer Casey Martin and the golf cart captured a great deal of attention. Martin petitioned the PGA—the Professional Golfers’ Association—for permission to ride a golf cart in pro tournaments as an accommodation for a mobility impairment. When the PGA turned him down, Martin took the case to court. It was eventually deliberated in the Supreme Court, where Martin prevailed. The most significant outcome of the debate, I think, is that the discussion came down to the question, What *is* the game of golf? Some people said, If he rides a cart, that’s not golf. I’d like to know, then, what golf is and who has decided. (519)

As I mentioned, the example is instructive, but also rather telling: GOLF?! Come on! I challenge the reader to name one non-white golfer . . . Okay, now name one non-white golfer *besides* Tiger and Vijay.

On a more serious note, as I read through the collection of essays and presentations from the Emory conference I am concerned with how often each scholar cites the other, revealing an uncomfortable

incestuousness about Disability Studies. These individuals seem unwilling to step aside even briefly and let someone else have the (proverbial) microphone for a moment. Granted, if the MLA calls, there is appeal in the form of professional legitimacy. But I also suggest that there is appeal in giving someone else a chance to speak to the issues embedded in and examined by Disability Studies, in asking who will be there and figuring out who *should* be there, as well as who has not been asked and why. The failure to do so practically ensures that the silences, namely those concerning race and ethnicity, will not be addressed and will continue.

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If Disability Studies as a field had taken a reflexive look at itself at some point, particularly with regard to its failings in examining issues of race and ethnicity, there might not be such a glaring dearth of disability-related scholarship by and about disabled people of color. As it stands, Disability Studies has a tenuous relationship with race and ethnicity: while the field readily acknowledges its debt to and inspiration by inquiries such as Black Studies, its efforts at addressing intersections between disability, race, and ethnicity are, at best, wanting. Disability Studies claims to examine the experiences of a vast number of disabled people, yet the form that representation takes is, far too often, a white one. This is by no means a sporadic occurrence. Quite the contrary, the slights occur habitually and, as the preceding examples prove, in various contexts, from published works to conferences. I think it is essential to illuminate the fragile relationship between disability, race, and ethnicity in extant Disability Studies, arguing not so much for a sea-change in this formulation, rather for a more definitive and accurate identification of the happening.

What follows then is my ten-point scheme (*pace*, Mr. Letterman) on how to keep White Disability Studies in vogue and instantiated as disability praxis. Given the fact that well-intentioned individuals are inclined to ask what can be done to “make things more diverse,” I have purposely crafted the following as a series of “do nots.” By doing so, I hope to shore up how presumptuous it is to position the subaltern as the all-knowing savant insofar as issues of diversity; requesting definitive answers from that person when the answers might best come from within, following an extended period of rumination.

10. **Do not change a thing.** Let’s keep doing what we’re doing. Let’s remain firmly rooted in *this* wave of disability, consciously opting not to move to the next. Let’s continue to acknowledge white individuals as the Disability Studies core constituency.⁶ Do not outreach to communities of color or participate in their events when the opportunity to forge connections arises. Do not solicit for a themed issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* on race, ethnicity and disability⁷ and if by chance said issue should be produced, make sure that it occurs only once; that there are no efforts to ensure that these intersections are spoken to throughout future iterations of the journal in a non-“special issue” context. In sum, do not change a thing. Continue to fetishize and exoticize people of color as subalterns by constantly focusing on *their* race and ethnicity, but not that of the white subject.
9. **Do not address ethnicity, rather continually focus on race.** Many Disability Studies scholars—and people in general—are unwilling or unable to pick up on the cultural significance of ethnicity in contraposition to what some are (erroneously) convinced is the biological foundation of race. Regardless of where the two concepts spring from, the fact is that they are distinct. It becomes problematic then when all that comprises ethnicity gets collapsed under the umbrella term of race. As a field White Disability Studies has no stake in this process and therefore should do nothing to address it.
8. **Do not consider that, as Stuart Hall has explained, “Cultural identity is not an essence but a positioning”** (229). Generally speaking, the same people who hold power in the community of scholars known as Disability Studies are a mimetic rendering of those holding power in non-disabled communities: white people. Despite the fact that people of color outnumber white people in the world, white people harbor hegemony and cultural capital. Whether or not

disabled people of color outnumber disabled white individuals—or whether people of color interested in Disability Studies outnumber whites interested in the same—the fact is Disability Studies is conceived of as a white field (recall Davis’s comments from the Emory conference). White Disability Studies should pay no attention to this, doing nothing to change this conception, this positioning. It does not matter that whiteness is not an essentialist prerequisite for a disability identity. We can just pretend that it is.

7. **Pay no attention to Ann duCille’s recognition that “[O]ne of the dangers of standing at an intersection . . . is the likelihood of being run over” (593).** When you come across a non-white disabled person, focus on the disability, eliding the race and ethnicity, letting them be run over, forgotten. Do not consider how the intersection in which this subject lives influences her actions and the way she is seen. Choose not to see that intersection and quickly move on down the road of disability, away from the “perpendicular” roads of race and ethnicity. The fact that the intersection exists is not your fault. It is a prime example of poor engineering.
6. **Disregard Evelyn Hammonds’s idea that “visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen” (141).** Do not forget to revel in the idea that as more and more disabled people enter the mainstream, all disabled people, irrespective of their racial and ethnic subjectivity, occupy the same place at the table. Equate visibility with inclusivity. Sit back and be satisfied, and do not allow yourself to be troubled by those who carp about their invisibility within disability communities.
5. **Ignore Horkheimer and Adorno’s augury that failure to conform to the culture industry results in the individual being “left behind” (37).** The two theorists warn of the perils of living in a culture industry whereby one must subscribe to the right magazines and watch the correct films in order to be accepted in the culture. White Disability Studies is nothing like this; there is nothing even remotely similar to a “disability industry.” Thus, it is not true that if you make a film about “crip culture” and you populate that film with only white people, you will be left behind. Quite the contrary, you will receive awards and plaudits, kudos and huzzahs, for this. It is not true that if you enter a room that purports to gather together those interested and engaged in Disability Studies and see not a single person of color present, those people have been left behind or otherwise disinvited. Be still; speak not. Do not draw attention to their absence. Let them be remaindered out. They always have been, and besides, they have probably chosen not to enter the space.
4. **Make no allowances for liminality and hybridity.** Instead, continue the pretence of normality, the idea that everything’s just fine and that the disability community is one happy family with no diversity, no multivalence, only a collective sameness. Do not conceive of the silences that are imbricated in extant Disability Studies. Likewise, do not conceive of the concerted efforts to counter those silences, to advocate for liminality and hybridity, as described, in a different context, in Abena Busia’s “Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female”:

The systematic refusal to hear our [African American females] speech is not the same thing as our silence. That we have hitherto been spoken of as absent of silenced does not mean we have been so . . . The systematic refusal to hear our speech which colonial literature mirrors, though it has historically removed us from the nexus of certain kinds of power, does not and never actually could render us silent. In unmasking the dispossessions of the silences of fiction and the fictions of silence, we (re)construct self-understanding. Furthermore, for women, “Narrative” is not always and only, or even necessarily a speech act. We women signify: we have many modes of (re)dress. (103–4)

Do not consider how minority discourse from within a minority discourse is in and of itself counter-hegemonic. Do not encourage the proliferation of that discourse even though it is resistive and liberating. As we all know, the presence of too many voices results in senseless cacophony and what good is that?

3. **Do whatever you can *not* to discuss those texts rife with possibilities insofar as parsing out intersections between disability, race, and ethnicity, namely:**

The Souls of Black Folk

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois introduced his concept of double consciousness that speaks to the black American's irreconcilable sense of self as "an African" and "an American." Since there is nothing to be gained by applying this theory to black disabled subjects (triple consciousness?), it is best not to consider this text as having any bearing on Disability Studies.

Up From Slavery

Published around the same time as DuBois's text, *Up From Slavery* is frequently taught alongside *The Souls of Black Folk*. Washington takes a much more assimilationist approach to black subjectivity in contraposition to DuBois. Perhaps a Disability Studies scholar might draw parallels between the Washington/DuBois ideas of black subjectivity and the difference between those disabled subjects who want to advocate for peaceful resistance and mainstreaming in juxtaposition to those who take a more activist, resistant stance. But then again, that would be an utter waste of the scholar's time.

Invisible Man

I am an invisible man . . . I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. (3)

The first lines of Ellison's text speak to the difficulty of black ontology in the United States. Ellison's protagonist, of course, is not speaking of a literal invisibility so much as he is drawing light to how it is that others (read: whites with hegemonic power) choose not to see him in totality. If this characterization does not seem applicable to Disability Studies—wherein the racialized subaltern is remembered and considered solely as a matter of convenience more often than not—I don't know what would be. Yet it would be foolish to illuminate this text's applicability to Disability Studies, or, furthermore, to consider the prophetic final lines of the novel—"who know but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (581)—wherein the protagonist considers the complexities of representing and/or embodying communal univocality. I do not recommend examining this.

Roots

A Disability Studies scholar might examine aspects of disability throughout the text, namely those that are linked to racial positioning e.g. the causes and effects of Kunta Kinte's "crippling.") Then again, she might not.

Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self

This widely-anthologized personal narrative describes Alice Walker's sense of self as a disabled subject after she is blinded as a child. "I didn't pray for sight," she writes, "I prayed for beauty." Any Disability Studies scholar worth her salt should immediately discern the implications of this statement, but that does not mean that she must act upon it in her scholarship. Likewise, the scholar might pay attention to Walker's intentional use of language, e.g., the allusion to Stevie Wonder towards the end of the narrative. Alas, she might pay attention to it, but there is absolutely nothing to be gained from explicating it.

The Cure

Ginu Kamani's short story is set in contemporary India. The protagonist must deal with living in a culture that has deemed her "too-tall." What is interesting is that the reader never learns

just how tall she is, evidentiary of a societal code that is unspoken and yet accepted. Unfortunately, since the story is set in India, where whites are the minority, it cannot be of interest to a Disability Studies scholar.

“The Adventures of Felix”

Race is usually considered a black and white issue. This film complicates that assessment. The protagonist, the titular Felix, is a multiracial French gay man with HIV who sets out to find the father he never knew. Although many critics and individuals familiar with AIDS narratives herald the film for its portrayal of a person with AIDS who is effortlessly “handling” his disease, a disability theorist might pay particular attention to how easily AIDS is removed from the narrative in favor of other concerns. But I doubt that would ever happen.

“Birth of a Nation, or The Clansman”

Long before “Triumph of the Will” was unleashed on the populace, this legendary slice of propaganda was released and heralded. The issues of performativity at play here are rife for discussion, as are their implications insofar as who gets to represent race and/or disability. A Disability Studies scholar might link the use of blackface in this film with the use of non-disabled actors to play disabled figures in contemporary films. But, again, I doubt that would ever happen.

In sum, continue thinking that these texts are too long (e.g., *Invisible Man*) and that the disability perspective is too tangential (e.g., “The Adventures of Felix”) to warrant devoting time to. Do not select key scenes to analyze and discuss. Ignore the texts altogether. Continue to herald the overt elisions and missed opportunities.

2. **Do not note how odd “White Disability Studies” looks on this page**, how much effort it requires (or does it?) to contort one’s tongue in order to articulate it. Do not take into account how foreign a phrase it seems (although just because something is foreign doesn’t necessarily mean that it is incomprehensible...).
1. **Do not change a thing**. Keep doing what *you’re* doing. Do so because what you’re doing is fine, more than enough to keep White Disability Studies firmly instantiated as the norm. Make no effort to be more inclusive in your scholarship. Do not start today, do not start tomorrow. Wait for someone else to do inclusive work. Wait for however long it takes.

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By way of conclusion, I want to stress that Disability Studies is not the only field of inquiry wherein individuals of color are treated as second-class citizens. If anything, Disability Studies is merely aping the ideology of the vast majority of academic disciplines and ways of thinking that preceded it and which it now sits alongside of. While I could have devoted this modest proposal to advocating for a more hybrid Disability Studies, a liminal version, the fact is I am not certain that advocating for such an idea is a worthwhile undertaking. I deem it far more instructive to acknowledge that we are positioned in the realm of “White Disability Studies” and continue along with the truth of this positioning in mind.

Moreover, offering White Disability Studies, even in the form of a tongue-in-cheek modest proposal, is bound to unnerve many of the individuals who consider themselves engaged in Disability Studies. White Disability Studies will most likely strike these individuals as a hyperbolic and counterintuitive claim. Perhaps my actions might be deemed impolitic and offensive. That is the point. I think it is tactless to dismiss a message solely because of its ostensible unpopularity or because the individual bearing the message seems undesirable. Such a process is itself counterintuitive, intended to draw attention away from a message that, while perhaps unpopular, might contain more than a modicum of validity. Because Disability Studies in its current incarnation *is* White Disability Studies, proposing we honor that creates no crisis of conscience for me. If anything, I take heart in remembering what Bubba Gump declared to Dorian Gray on “Check, Please!”: “If it looks like a shrimp, and it smells and tastes like a shrimp, it’s a shrimp.”

Notes

1. Far from excluding people of color, White Disability Studies treats people of color as if they were white people; as if there are no critical exigencies involved in being people of color that might necessitate these individuals understanding and negotiating disability in a different way from their white counterparts.
2. Reader: If you think it odd that our feelings of solidarity were premised on disinvitation, realize that this is a reality of many people of color engaged in White Disability Studies.
3. Coincidentally, the people of color caucuses at both conferences presented their list of action items in the exact same space, the Mary Ward Hall at San Francisco State University.
4. The pagination to follow is from this issue of *PMLA*.
5. Briefly, the “post-race debate” argues that race is no longer a valid social construct or marker. By that light, the culture as a whole should move on and focus on other, purportedly more pressing issues e.g., class. I can deconstruct the entire post-race argument by simply pointing out that in a culture where racism exists and is pervasive, the casual dismissal of race is specious.
6. I offer AIDS as a precedent here. From the early 1980s until fairly recently, the conception of the AIDS afflicted subject was a gay white man. Indeed, the legacy still retains purchase on mainstream cultural consciousness. Of course, if there were only a few overtures to assess how the disease was impacting women and people of color—and when you think about the history of AIDS, you realize that up until quite recently this was the case—then it becomes obvious how gay white men became equated with AIDS. It is difficult to offer a counternarrative when the structures of power determining which identities comprise a subject are unyielding in their conception.
7. A cursory glance of the past few years of *DSQ*'s topical issues is rather enlightening in this regard. There is an abundance of special topics, none of which verge on what is, to me, one of the more obvious absences in the discourse.

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