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Panel Review: "Illness, Deformity, and Shock Re-Reading Disability"

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Illness, Deformity, and Shock

RE-READING DISABILITY

In 1995's *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*, Lennard Davis famously defined disability as a “disruption in the visual field.”¹ Over the course of the following decade, this theorization of disability as a “specular moment” would come to greatly impact the emergent field of disability studies.² By emphasizing the disabled body's potential for erasure, whether in scholarship or society at large, Davis's work both opened new avenues of academic inquiry and readied a political agenda in which disability was figured as a transformative category of political identity.³ However, as the papers presented during the Thinking Gender conference panel, “Illness, Deformity, and Shock: Re-Reading Disability,” suggested, structures of visibility and invisibility are but one of many ways of constructing disabledness. While the alliance between disability and issues of visibility has long given the field political traction, the set of papers which emerged from the panel indicated that many of disability studies' core tenets require a fresh reexamination. As moderator

Professor Helen Deutsch, Department of English, UCLA, noted, the aim of the panel was therefore to unsettle rather than cement the foundations of what has historically been a highly innovative and deeply interdisciplinary field. As such, the panel's participants employed a broad range of analyses to engage in acts of communal re-reading.



Jennifer Barager, Department of English, USC, began the panel with a paper entitled, “From the Periphery Towards the Center’: Locating an Alternative Genealogy for Disability Studies in Audre Lorde’s *Cancer Journals*.” Barager proposed Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* (1980) as an inspiring model for renovating the field of disability. Lorde’s text combines various formal characteristics (for example, essay, poetry, memoir) in order to chronicle the author’s experiences as a breast cancer patient. Written

in the wake of Lorde’s radical mastectomy, *The Cancer Journals* deftly intertwines the personal and political by foregrounding the experience of bodily trauma alongside Lorde’s subject position of black lesbian feminist. In light of this maneuvering, Barager suggested that we look to *The Cancer Journals* as an example of an intersectional approach which might be used to effectively situate disability within a larger constellation of race, class, and gender. Lorde’s account, Barager pointed out, also provides another valuable lesson for academic fields in that it emphasizes the importance of collaboration and communication. Though such ideas are not always prioritized in academia, a sphere in which the pursuit of individual research agendas sometimes trumps ideas concerning collectivity, the formation of community is often the very engine of social justice issues. Barager’s paper, therefore, offered Lorde’s personal account of illness as a means to expand and strengthen the existing purview of disability studies as a politically charged field.



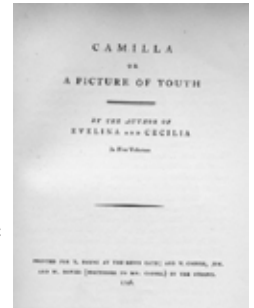
Annessa C. Stagner, Department of History, UC Irvine, delivered the panel's second paper, "Recovering the Masculine Hero: Post-World War I Shell

Shock in American Culture." Stagner's work investigated representations of shell shock in American films, magazines, and print mediums in the aftermath of World War I. Shell shock, she explained, was typically categorized in the period as a wide range of physical injuries and mental disturbances; however, in the mediums Stagner explored, shell shock was also usually represented as a curable and temporary condition that cloaked an otherwise heroic manliness. In her analysis, Stagner revealed a pattern in which a cure for this nebulous cluster of ailments was usually brought about through a romantic narrative of courtship or love involving a wholesome and nurturing woman. With domestic femininity firmly established as the means by which recovery was brought about, shell shock sufferers were then revealed to be the war heroes they had

apparently always been. Stagner provocatively linked this cultural understanding of shell shock to "the deep national wounds in the civic body." These representations, she argued, with their scientific certainty and confidence in traditional gender roles, exuded a palpable optimism in America's national character. In this sense, the portrayal of exterior ailments was always overshadowed by the inevitable revelation of interior masculine heroics. These narratives about male heroism, she added insightfully, also functioned as a cover for the ways in which the symptoms of shell shock (behavior manifesting mentally and physically) often shared many characteristics with constructions of female hysteria. Ultimately, Stagner's paper explored the relationship between body, mind, and gender in order to provide a thorough and convincing examination of the cultural anxieties expressed by representations of shell shock in Post-World War I America.

Turning the conversation toward constructions of femininity and female bodies, the panel's third participant, Jennifer Locke, Department of English, UC Irvine, delivered the paper, "Reading Female Bodies: Deformity, Gender and Fortunetelling in Frances Burney's

Camilla." Locke's presentation offered an analysis of the ways in which Frances Burney's eighteenth-century novel *Camilla*, with its narrative of two sisters, Camilla and Eugenia, "examines and dismantles cultural fictions about the female body" and the trajectory of women's lives. Locke focused on a reading of the sister Eugenia, whose disfigurement, she argued, resisted dominant modes of reading the body. Though in possession of an atypical body, Eugenia is of particularly sound mind; what's more, Eugenia's disability, while suggesting her illegibility, inevitably allows her access to educational opportunities which defy gender norms. In this sense, Locke argued, Eugenia's narrative is offered as an alternative to her sister Camilla's limited set of choices. The titular heroine, for example, while in possession of an abled, and therefore legible, body, must follow normative gendered plots. Locke also connected constructions of gender, the body, and disfigurement with the discourse on fortunetelling in the eighteenth century. She deftly framed her paper with a discussion of



how fortunetelling manuals manifested cultural anxieties about gender through their connection of women's fates with their bodies. Burney's novel, Locke argued, can be read as a challenge to this method of reading (and in many ways, controlling) women's bodies and lives. Inevitably, Locke's paper functions as a thoughtful response to much of the existing work on disability in eighteenth-century studies, especially from scholars such as Lennard Davis and the panel's chair, Helen Deutsch, both of whom have treated the subject of disability in relation to literary figures such as Samuel Johnson and Alexander Pope.

The panel's final paper was given by Jeni Maple, Department of English, Oklahoma State University. In "The Intersection of Feminism and Disability Theory in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," Maple built upon the work of scholar Rosemary Garland Thompson by arguing for a broadening of disability studies to include categories of mental illness. Her reading of Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) suggested the extent to which representations of mental illness are often hinged on also representing the body's debilitation. For example, throughout the course of *The Bell Jar*, the central character Esther's

mental instability is frequently tied to her physical impairment or confinement. Maple offered several examples from the novel, ranging from Esther's inability to perform in a professional capacity, her encounters with predatory men, and her trials with the institutions that seek to confine and rehabilitate the mentally ill. Maple's analysis highlighted the relationship between body and mind and addressed how the representation of both often circle around, at least in Plath's work, attempts to assert control. As such, Maple argued that a feminist framework must also be married to an attention to disability studies in order to more fully assess the novel's portrayal of a woman whose identity is shaped by experiences stemming from her position as both a gendered and disabled subject. This critical move, Maple suggested, usefully aligns feminist concerns with a disability studies agenda.

Ultimately, the four papers did much in the way of broadening horizons, demonstrating the productivity of bringing an intersectional approach to bear on the study of disability. In her summation, Panel Chair Helen Deutsch suggested that disability often served as the "margin beyond the margin," the rhetorical ground against which other identities are constituted; however,

by seriously considering the relationship of disability to other identity categories, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, the panel's papers were able to question the lines drawn between mind and body, visibility and invisibility, and disability and any number of other identity categories. In doing so, the panelists collectively modeled a new and invigorating approach which could expand and enliven the field of disability studies.

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NOTES

1. Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (London, New York: Verso, 1995) 94, 128, 142.
2. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 12.
3. For example, Davis' discussion of "dismodernism" is buoyed by what he sees as the defining feature of disability: its instability as a category (what Davis reads as radical possibility). Lennard J. Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002) 22.