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Introduction: Disorienting Disability

Disorient, disoriented, disorienting. We use these words when we've lost our way, when we feel confused, when we're bewildered, when there is a lack of connection or things do not make sense—or perhaps they once made sense and then ceased to do so. What, then, does it mean to disorient disability? Before we answer that question, we need to ask another: what is disability when it's *not* disoriented? The general direction of disability studies has argued for viewing disability as a social, cultural, and political construction that is defined by the interaction of physical environments, political and economic structures, and social interactions with individual bodily impairments. While emerging interactionally, disability as a concept and experience is explained through the medical and social models of disability (e.g., Barnes and Mercer 2003; Shakespeare 2002),[1] models that catalyzed the field and with which scholars still continue to grapple. Disability scholars have situated the emergence of disability as a category in relation to the coming of modernity, the rise of the assembly line, and the state's need to quantify and regulate populations (e.g., Baynton 2001; Davis 1995; Kohrman 2005; Stiker 1999).

However, disability has become an increasingly ubiquitous category, to the extent that, as anthropologists Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (2001) argue in their work on demographics in the United States, it has become a new normal. Increasing numbers of babies are born with conditions that previously would have resulted in death, people are living well into older age, and younger people are seeking out diagnosis for conditions that might have been dismissed in a previous era. Disability as a "new normal" encapsulates the fact that more people are living with disabilities as a result of medical technology and that we perceive more conditions as disability as a result of the normalization of the category. Concurrent with this demographic shift, disability, or certain "feel-good" forms of it, are increasingly visible in public, on primetime TV, in Broadway shows, in advertising campaigns, and in politics. Disability is increasingly becoming normalized as an identity and the "social fund of knowledge" (Rapp and Ginsburg 2001: 551) about disability is expanding. A few examples of this recent shift are the #cripthevote Twitter hashtag and the corresponding activist movement, and the proliferation of T-shirts proclaiming "The Future is Accessible."

To be sure, disability is also a category that is widely expansive in its inclusion of diverse impairments with varied levels of severity, age of onset, and impact on activities of daily life; it can be amorphous and imprecise. When Michele has taught disability studies courses to both undergraduate and graduate students, students always express confusion over what counts as a disability and who gets to claim disability status. Students ask about mental health diagnoses, fatness, deaf people who use signed languages, deaf people who have "normal" audiograms with cochlear implants, and so on. They also ask whether people across disability categories can relate to one another and whether it makes sense to have so many diverse conditions included in one category (Kohrman 2005). And they ask how to think of questions of pain and trauma productively in a field that has traditionally been uneasy about such topics (also see Christina Crosby in this issue). Similarly, Karen has been in meetings with the diversity officers on her campus where questions have come up about how to count and identify disability in job applicants for tenure-track positions.[2] Disability joins the identity categories of women, minorities, and veterans, and increasingly, campuses such as those of the City University of New York, where Karen works, are urged to recruit more job candidates with disabilities for open faculty positions. However, what does a commitment to diversity that includes disability actually perform when disability itself is hard to identify or define? (see Ahmed 2012).

To return to our first question: what does it mean to disorient disability, and furthermore, why would we want to do so? Borrowing from some of the tools developed within feminist and critical race theory, the papers in this special issue all argue, in various ways, that it is important to deconstruct disability—or the language used to describe disability—as a social fact and norm, as a static identity. Whereas "women" might have once been the object of focus for feminist theory, or "black people" might have been an object of focus for critical race theory, or "queer people" for queer theory, as each of these fields developed, theorists began expanding feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory to consider how these theories could help us understand systems of power, underlying assumptions, and also the absence of historically marginalized groups in texts or situations (although also see Cassandra Hartblay in this issue for a provocative critique of the term *marginalization*). Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992) developed some of this work in critical race studies by subverting the dominant (white) lens applied to texts by and about white people; Wendy Brown's (1995) examination of the liberal state, while not always explicitly about women, is always informed by how feminist theory understands systems of power; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) launched the field of queer theory by teaching us that queerness is a way of approaching the world, our bodies, and our desires, as much as it is an identity. In much the same way, the authors in this issue often approach disability not as identity but as method. (Yet, of course, several are still focusing on disabled peoples' experiences. We don't see a contradiction in doing both.) Thinking about disability as method is not new; other scholars have done the same before us (see Dokumaci 2018; Minich 2016). However, we argue that thinking disability as method helps to avoid the sedimentation of disability as a category since it allows us to place disability in conversation with other concepts and worlds; disability is not the endpoint but the starting point for new ways of understanding our environments, our assumptions, and ourselves.[3] As Talia Schaffer argues in this issue, arguments developed by disability studies scholars about ethics of care can be expanded to consider communities not conventionally defined as disabled.

While disability studies has challenged norms and ideas of normality by offering up disability as a concept (Davis 1995; Linton 1998), we want to take an orthogonal and/or distancing step to consider what it means that disability has become a norm. Certainly, scholars have already done important work in disorienting the concept of disability, thus revealing some of its analytical possibilities and constraints: Julie Livingston's (2005) study of debility

in Botswana argues that the Western conception of disability doesn't translate into Setswana and Batswana culture; Jasbir Puar (2017) similarly argues that the coherence of a term like *disability* presupposes political-economic conditions that enable the maximizing of profit and the valorization of certain classed and sexed disabled bodies; and Margrit Shildrick (2015) has deconstructed the term *disability*, which is always shadowed by its twin, *ability*, to further develop the term *debility* as an alternative (also see Shildrick, this issue).

Additionally, scholars increasingly refuse to look at disability without also considering intersections with other categories of difference (Erevelles 2011; Kumari Campbell 2008); then there are those who argue that intersectionality is still too dependent on categories (e.g., Puar 2017). More recently, some scholars, in the tradition of Morrison (1992), have argued that disability theory shouldn't be used to analyze only disability in a text but also the absence or specter of disability (Bérubé 2016). What other alternatives might exist as scholars and activists disorient, divest, and diverge from the category of disability? As disability studies scholars attend to the genealogies of their field as a discipline, new allied and/or derivative fields have emerged, such as crip studies and critical disability studies. These paths of inquiry often foreground the disconnect and disjuncture that exists between the category of disability and lived experience. Such scholarship is also critical of the ways that the category of disability is entangled within neoliberal logics and politics of recognition. In this special issue, recognition is not the endpoint for us or for contributing authors. As Lisa Diedrich (this issue) argues, there can be a double bind associated with identity politics and a focus on rights alone. Attending to recognition through identity politics and rights offers limited analytic and experiential purchase; along with Arseli Dokumaci (this issue) and Crosby (this issue), we want to think about everyday disability affordances and the work of grief and mourning, for example.

What of the limits of the field of disability studies? In a US context, Chris Bell (2006) has famously argued that disability studies should be renamed "white disability studies," and other scholars have since continued this important line of critique (e.g., Erevelles and Minear 2010; Schalk 2013). Scholars working outside of the Global North have attended to both local and specific conceptions of bodily impairment, arguing that disability as a concept has become hegemonic and communicable as a result of international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (e.g., Meekosha and Soldatic 2011; Soldatic and Grech

2014); a new journal titled *Disability and the Global South* (dgsjournal.org) has been launched to attend to this topical area. Such work has called us to engage critically questions of whose voices are left out as well as the flattening of experience that happens when the category of disability travels and seemingly becomes universal.

Since orientations and disorientations involve the body (and body-minds) in space and time in addition to questions of categorization and identification, we are interested in thinking through how the category of disability might change how we think of bodies orienting in space and time. Are all paths, desire lines, objects, and interpellations equally accessible, and how do we conceptualize access in different spaces? How do disability orientations and disorientations emerge and how do people orient toward and away from disability as a category and experience? What kind of theoretical and empirical turns, twists, skips, and spins might emerge in thinking through this proposed thematic of disorienting disability? What kinds of affordances does disability offer, as Dokumaci (this issue) explores? As Sara Ahmed (2006: 24) notes, "to live out a politics of disorientation might be to sustain wonder about the very forms of social gathering." If disability is increasingly recognized as a social and political category and disability studies has become institutionalized as a discipline in university settings around the world, what new politics of disorientation might we wish to consider?

The title for this special issue borrows from Ahmed's (2006) discussion of "orientations," which situates queer and raced bodies in relational space and time. She writes, "The concept of 'orientations' allows us to expose how life gets directed in some ways rather than others, through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us" (Ahmed 2006: 21). Ahmed proposes a politics of disorientation that disrupts conventional paths and definitions and contributes to the body of literature that upends the identity politics on which women's studies, queer studies, and critical race studies were founded. What happens, Ahmed wonders, when our physical and temporal points of reference aren't located in the places we seek them? What happens when they shift, when they refuse to remain still, when their definitions change in relation to their surroundings?

As we've argued elsewhere (Friedner and Weingarten 2016), we want to resist the model of adding disability as a category of analysis and experience that then becomes another identity through which to read literature, or do ethnography, or write political theory (or name your discipline and the ways in which identity functions within it). In our own work, we saw the

problems with disability as an additive category that was tacked on to other categories of difference. We observed, for example, that this was manifested in diversity discourses often embraced by both activists and scholars in which disability became another (unmarked and unnuanced) category to add to a laundry list of identities subsumed under diversity. This happens in top-down ways, through affirmative action/equal opportunity policies, and in bottom-up mechanisms, through disability activists' claims that disability is a part of human diversity, for example (e.g., Garland-Thomson 2012). Claiming disability-as-diversity is an orienting move that we seek to disorient: it requires that disabled people negotiate and potentially dismiss forms of self- and collective knowledge and ignore biosocial realities that are specific and often messy. It sediments identity as fixed—person x becomes representative of identity x in this model—and forecloses the possibility that real difference is recognized as such. Diversity then becomes just another way to categorize and organize bodies, and as such it never challenges existing hierarchies, genealogies, or understandings of *why* marginalization, discrimination, and violence occur.

Our idea for this issue emerged as a result of concerns about disability's crystallization as an identity and concretization as a category. In our work, when we thought about the way that disabled peoples' attempts to fit themselves into a disability box and thus a diversity box became disorienting, we realized that it would be productive to parse out the stakes of disability, particularly when using different methods, processes, and theories. We take inspiration from Julie Avril Minich (2016), who writes, "I propose an approach to Disability Studies that emphasizes its mode of analysis rather than its objects of study." Therefore, the essays selected for this special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* don't claim to comprehensively survey disability studies. On the contrary, they often question the terms of the field and place them in conversation with other fields in order to expand it, challenge it, and question it. What happens when disability is worked through by scholars in English, women and gender studies, performance studies, philosophy, and anthropology? The essays that follow offer us different methods of approaching and disorienting disability: through memoir, through rhetoric, through pain, through care, through a study of affordance, through an analysis of pixelization and marginalization, and through a renewed exploration of debility. We see these essays as both a continuation of conversations happening in disability studies, and as a way to reach out to people who might not be currently working in the field but find the various methods proposed by our contributors to be productive.

Notes

1   Briefly, the medical model of disability posits that disability resides in the individual and that the individual needs to be fixed, rehabilitated, or cured. On the other hand, the social model argues that disability is located outside the body and is created through disabling social, political, and economic infrastructures and attitudes.

2   The City University of New York identifies people with disabilities as an underrepresented group in faculty positions, and therefore encourages search committees for faculty positions to reach out to potential candidates with disabilities for recruitment purposes.

3   Jemima Repo (2015) has argued that feminist theory "has embraced the idea of gender because biopower has concealed itself from its deployment. It is these camouflaged power relations that deploy the discourse of gender that a genealogy of gender strives to unveil and critique." We are concerned with how "disability" functions similarly to "gender" and want to demonstrate, contrary to Nancy Hirschmann (2012), why disability should not be configured as the "new gender." We argue, along with our contributors, that disability is often a process and a method that resists neat categorization.

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