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Visionary Politics and Methods in Feminist Disability Studies

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Cover Page Footnote

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Visionary Politics and Methods in Feminist Disability Studies

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Abstract: In this introduction we explore the genealogies and methodologies of feminist disability studies (FDS). A feminist methodology is politically situated with a focus on the material conditions and social and cultural structures that marginalized people bear, experience, and resist. Methods, and the theories that underpin and create those methodological tools, can open or foreclose possibilities for praxis. Considering theory and method as mutually informative intellectual projects, we ask, how can our methods influence political investments that open up visionary possibilities and plans? How can we take a coalitional approach to disability politics as a method that is informed by collaboration, rather than appropriation? How can we put both our theories and methods to work in service of a justice-oriented praxis? Furthermore, we take a feminist disability studies lens to the concept of academic rigor. With the academy's delegitimation of the production of marginalized knowledge by marginalized people, and the ensuing defenses and institutionalization of these knowledges as indeed rigorous, a feminist disability studies method proposes that we no longer defend the rigorousness of marginalized scholarship, but rather discard rigor as a benchmark for valid and valuable research.

Keywords: disability studies, methods, rigor, feminist disability studies

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Content Notification: This article contains discussion of eugenics, racism, ableism, and white supremacy.

Summer 2020: Public Reckonings and Re-reckonings

In a March 18th post for the *Disability Visibility Project*, disabled activist and writer Alice Wong (2020) reflected on the power of crip predictive wisdoms in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, insisting that: "Disabled people know what it means to be vulnerable and interdependent. We are modern-day oracles. It's time people listened to us." The threat of "ICUgenics" (#NoBodyIsDisposable 2020) where disabled people, fat people, and people of color could be passed over for ventilators and other treatments due to medical discrimination and the refusals of many to "mask up" display a widespread, hyper-individualist disregard of those most vulnerable to the virus. Simultaneously, the swift movements towards accommodations for online meetings, events, and working from home for able-bodied people that seemed "impossible" to accommodate disabled people before the COVID-19 pandemic, show how crip practices and creativity have now come into widespread use, often without attribution to the disabled people who have called for and implemented them.

Crip time, described by Ellen Samuels (2017) also as “grief time,” permits necessary space for mourning. The rush to return to *normal* amongst the deep griefs and losses of this year, the desire to move past social unrest and mass trauma and debilitation—this injunction to *move on*—is also rooted in how, as activist TL Lewis (2020) argues, “anti-Blackness, eugenics, colonialism and capitalism” undergird ableism. The linked temporalities of ableism and racism are embedded within what Tema Okun (n.d.) describes as a “sense of urgency” in white supremacy culture, which “makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, to consider consequences” (2). Mia Mingus (2010) approaches this urgency from the perspective of disabled queer people of color, insisting: “We move together” because “I know what it is like to be left behind, left out, forgotten about.”

These temporalities evince a widespread public re-reckoning that trends, consumes violence against Black people via social media platforms, then recedes. A disability justice lens also calls for us to understand that we are encountering entwined public health crises of COVID-19 and police brutality—the “twin pandemics”¹—both of which overwhelmingly impact Black communities. Violence against trans people, particularly disabled and nondisabled trans people of color, persists more than ever throughout these crises as we also lose trans people to COVID-19, insufficient healthcare, and lack of mental health support. Given these conditions, the urgent need for praxis-based approaches in this moment returns us to the materiality of feminist methods and disability justice.

Bringing Feminist Disability Studies Methods to Practice

In this special issue for *The Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, we explore the mechanisms that influence what is possible in Feminist Disability Studies (FDS). A feminist methodology is politically situated with a focus on the material conditions and social and cultural structures that marginalized people bear, experience, and resist (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, and Yaiser 2004). Feminist methods, then, bring us to these knowledges through critical interrogation of texts, excavation of historical documents, and careful documentation of the experiences of ourselves and our interlocutors. Methods, and the theories that underpin and create those methodological tools, can open or foreclose possibilities for praxis. In considering theory and method as mutually informative intellectual projects, how can our methods influence political investments that open up visionary possibilities and plans? How can we take a coalitional approach to disability politics that is informed by collaboration, rather than appropriation? How can we put both our theories and methods to work in service of a justice-oriented praxis?

Visionary politics are a cornerstone of many contemporary activist movements. Academic movements, such as critical FDS, pull from this genealogy of writing ourselves into a canon while urging for nuanced accounts of our lives. Pulling together activist and academic concerns, FDS scholar Alison Kafer (2013), in conversation with social activist and cultural historian Bernice Johnson Reagon, posits that a “robust combination of future dreams and present critique is essential to politics, and it requires leaving open the parameters of our political visions” (153). Kafer’s book, a formative FDS work, urges us to keep visionary parameters open as both a theoretical and methodological concern, requiring a commitment to subtle distinctions. Disability and transformative justice activist Mia Mingus (2018) similarly invites us all to think and act critically to change interlocking and oppressive structures:

I want us to think beyond just knowing the “right things to say” and be able to truly engage. I want us to not only make sure things are accessible, but also work to transform the conditions that created that inaccessibility in the first place. To not only meet the immediate needs of access—whether that is access to

spaces, or access to education and resources, or access to dignity and agency—but also work to make sure that the inaccessibility doesn't happen again (para. 27).

In her work on disability justice, she urges us to create an action plan and a roadmap. We foreground methods in this issue in an attempt to highlight the tools to “truly engage.” Mingus, Kafer, and Reagon talk about intersectionality and political visioning as both the theory and method through which to dismantle systems that oppress and marginalize bodyminds. Part of the theory and method of this approach is through disability justice, a movement that eschews sameness models of equality for a celebration of difference and a relentless fight for the recognition of multiple interlocking oppressions.

For this special issue, we asked: What is needed to enrich the scholarship in the interdisciplinary field of Feminist Disability Studies? In the spirit of disability justice work, how can our methods and citational practices create pathways for praxis-oriented approaches? As an open access journal, *The Journal of Feminist Scholarship* asks us to consider the reach of interdisciplinary feminist studies, and we take up the mantle through centering authors who identify with and experience space through disabled bodyminds. Julie Minich's (2016) piece “Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now” argues that disability studies methodology “involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations.” In “Stories of Methodology: Interviewing Sideways, Crooked and Crip,” Price and Kershbaum (2016) echo Minich's call for scholars of disability studies “to call CDS [critical disability studies] a methodology . . . to re-claim the inseparability of disability activism plus theory, a claim going back decades” (23). They argue that disability studies methodologies are “sideways, crooked, and crip” because disability experiences are not linear or orderly, but rather messy and without easy resolutions (22). This special issue takes a cue from Minich, Price, and Kershbaum's work to attempt to further the what and how of Feminist Disability Studies' specific methodologies. The scholars in this issue also engage in an exploration of some of the methodological approaches that might help us do that critical political visioning, including through close reading, historicism, theory building, archival research, and autoethnography.

Against Rigor: An FDS Ethic

A hallmark of qualitative and quantitative research in the social sciences is *rigor* (i.e., Davis and Dodd 2002; Morse 2015). While FDS is an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary mingling of knowledges, not solely residing in the social sciences, we are nevertheless bound to certain types of evaluative criteria in peer review, hiring, testing, writing, and other academic practices. The concept of rigor can function as a sort of mysterious, yet looming, requirement of the research one does in the academy. Rigor in its opacity is often used as a tool to marginalize interdisciplinary work—accusations of a lack of rigorous methodology rings in the ears of many an interdisciplinary contingent faculty member. If rigor is something we are all trying to prove, or live up to in some way, what are the effects of such a concept? Rigor definitionally connotes harsh, rigid, cruel, and painstaking. Rigor as requisite evaluative criteria for method and methodology means we must interrogate the ableism inherent in an ethic of exhaustion that also invokes pain. Painted in this picture of the rigorous scholar in the ivory tower (or the board room of the corporate university) is an unquestioned white, cisgender, heterosexual, ablebodyminded man with the financial resources to produce knowledge, which functions more as an image than a reality scholars can live up to.² Critiquing rigor does not mean forgoing evaluative criteria for research, but rather, questioning what it means to require and valorize rigor in the project of academic legitimization. Margarete

Sandelowski (1993) cautioned researchers that the preoccupation with rigor only as “fortification against attack” comes at the cost of “meaningful portraits, stories, and landscapes of human experience” (2). Renee Dumaresque, writing in this issue on autoethnography and chronic vulvar pain, for example, points to the useful ways we can use a method like autoethnography to intertwine “how the self is co-constituted with the socio-political and colonial context in relation to knowledge, power, and material conditions” (84). Autoethnography is not lacking in rigor but rather captures a different sort of nuance that is crucial to approaching a full, complex picture. Eschewing rigor does not mean eschewing reflexivity, transparency, keeping records and audit trails, and attending to power dynamics. Rather, we draw attention to the ways in which rigor can, in its everyday academic invocation, be used as a sharp tool that excises and delegitimizes marginalized experiences and bodyminds.

Margaret Price (2011) delineates in *Mad at School* that “academic discourse operates not just to omit, but to abhor mental disability—to reject it, to stifle and expel it” (8). Rigor’s connotation of mental and physical *sharpness* or *quickness*, alongside the imperative for spontaneous oral exchange in an interview, a classroom, or a conference presentation Q&A, further marginalizes the scholar with brain fog, the student experiencing PTSD, the sick feminist adjunct without health insurance, the scholar with chronic pain in the archive, and the feminist student activist encountering barriers from their college disability services office. As Gracen Brilmyer writes in this issue, “Archival absences are not only produced by those in power, but are also inherent to the lived experience of being sick or disabled” (35). Acknowledging the role of pain and illness in the production of scholarship cracks the persistent illusion of objectivity. There are disabled and ill bodyminds behind the knowledge produced in this issue, and the traces of their bodyminds inflect and impact what we think of as rigor.

We also see adherences to rigor in the imperative to reopen U.S. college campuses in the midst of a global pandemic. The belief that a greater percentage of so-called face-to-face courses are the most rigorous and high-quality mode of obtaining an education excludes disabled and vulnerable people who cannot enroll in these courses and upholds the notion that online courses are inherently less challenging. These biases come at the cost of the lives and health of campus employees and students, as well as those who are not affiliated with universities but live in geographical and economic proximity to the campus.

Queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz (2006) “interrupt[s] the regime of rigor” with “a question: Who owns rigor? I suggest that rigor is owned, made, and deployed through institutional ideology” (7). With the academy’s delegitimation of the production of marginalized knowledge by marginalized people, and the ensuing defenses and institutionalization of these knowledges as indeed rigorous, a FDS method proposes that we no longer defend the rigorousness of marginalized scholarship, but rather discard rigor as a benchmark for valid and valuable research.

Daily barriers to the proliferations of disabled knowledges include the inaccessibility of travel and transit for disabled people, the lack of access to archival research due to ableism and the imperative for scholars to have institutional affiliations, the imperfect access of interview procedures, and the ableism of the academic job market (and other fields where disabled knowledge is documented). In response to these ableisms in knowledge production, in this issue, Brilmyer develops a “critical disability archival methodology,” which “draw[s] attention to the granular ways in which absences are produced in records as well as expanding the ways in which we meet those omissions in archives” (28).

FDS Genealogies and Affiliations

The texts of FDS help us situate the scholarship in this issue within a genealogy of scholars and activists that have led us here. In the germinal volume *Feminist Disability Studies*, Kim Hall (2011) and the

contributing authors promote methods and methodologies that are flexible and open to an ambiguous process that provides at times incomplete and contradictory conclusions. Overall, a process and methodology from a FDS perspective should enable theories that help explore the inner workings and politics of identities and the social conditions that allow or disallow. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's (2011) initial provocation for FDS, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," outlines what a Feminist Disability Studies could accomplish: "integrating disability as a category of analysis, a historical community, a set of material practices, a social identity, a political position, and a representational system into the content of feminist—indeed into all inquiry—can strengthen the critique that is feminism" (7). Kafer's (2013) work *Feminist, Queer, Crip* continues to build on a methodological ethic that brings us closer to the contemporary nuanced work of FDS. She weaves the titular queer theory, feminist theory, and crip theory together, claiming coalition as methodology (17). Sami Schalk's (2018) crucial book *Bodyminds Reimagined* models the interconnectedness and crucial nuance that comes from reading Black feminism, disability studies, and Black women's speculative fiction together. Schalk's methodology draws together Black feminist theory and disability studies to "change the rules of interpretation" in order to go beyond simple binaries and ground in intersectionality (28).

FDS is deeply concerned with the intersections and discontinuities of the social, political, material, and personal. For this special issue, our authors take this mantle seriously. The intersection of trans studies with disability studies has taken into account embodied difference (Mog 2008) and access (Adair 2015). Eli Clare (2013), for example, argues for a disability politics of transness as a provocation for coalition based upon familiarity, not sameness or single-issue activism (265). Niamh Ó argues that "the core of a feminist disability studies and Trans Studies should be in the activism of Trans Women of Color" (59). Timmons's piece urges FDS to pay critical attention, time, and resources to the intersecting praxis of transfeminisms and disability justice, moving us away from single-issue analyses. In a similar vein of moving away from biological essentialism and toward affiliation, Amanda Ong argues in a reading of Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010) that "diaspora's attachment to genealogy and biology also means that it can uphold the normative structuring logics of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness" (68).

In their article "Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies," Sami Schalk and Jina B. Kim (2020) ask: "What would feminist disability studies look like if it were grounded in feminist of color theory? Feminists of color . . . have been writing about disability, illness, and health as part of feminist politics for decades. And yet, these formative feminist theorists have rarely been included in the intellectual lineage of feminist disability studies" (31). In line with Schalk and Kim, this issue highlights the generative possibilities of using an anti-racist FDS lens to discuss topics such as healing, cure, and states of health and (un)health created by racialized health inequities. Contributor Renee Dumaresque takes us to scenes of diagnosis within the medical industrial complex in "Vulvodynia, It's in My Head: Mad Methods Toward Crip Coalition." Dumaresque draws upon feminist of color critiques of diagnosis and medical racism to posit that, "while medical imaginaries construct notions of 'disease' and disability, they simultaneously construct population and race" (90). The pieces in this issue draw from a disability justice methodology, which distinguishes itself from a disability rights framework in its emphasis on intersectionality, collective access, and an anti-capitalist politic (Berne 2015).

In turn, these scholars also use the tools of critical disability studies to consider how ableism and racism interact to stigmatize people of color seeking health justice. For example, in "Occupied Land is an Access Issue: Interventions in Feminist Disability Studies and Narratives of Indigenous Activism," Jess L. Cowing proffers that "Access measures are acts of care, and each practice of care communicates to disabled, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent people that their presence is anticipated and expected. Yet FDS inquiries have largely avoided questions of colonization in critiques of state oppression and concepts

of access to healthcare and life-sustaining resources” (10). FDS approaches such as Cowing’s moves away from a genealogy of disability consciousness and activism that solely looks to the overwhelmingly white disability rights movement to understand disability activism, often to the exclusion of health and reproductive justice advocacy led by people of color.

Valuing FDS Knowledges

For this special issue on feminist disability methods, we would be remiss if we didn’t reflect upon the conditions under which this issue was created and circulated. We are feminist scholars, and for the majority of the time cultivating this issue one of us was a nonpermanent, contingent feminist scholar and now has the privilege of a tenure-track position. The other does not have a tenure-track job with intellectual security, and is a nonpermanent health services researcher who is producing feminist research outside of the forty-hour work week. We were drawn to *JFS*’s open access format so that community and independent scholars would not encounter the same gatekeeping of academic knowledges that we have experienced at times in our own situations. We have prioritized the work of graduate and non tenure-track scholars, believing that those who exist in what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) call the “undercommons” are generating our most valuable spaces, methods, and knowledges.

As disabled scholars we are acutely aware that, as Julie Minich (2016) writes, “the embrace of disability studies might foster complacency about ongoing injustices faced by disabled people.” Given the early deaths of disabled activists and scholars, the insistence upon disciplinary divides and associated difficulty of creating sustained support for interdisciplinary scholarship, ableist imperatives of productivity, quickness and “sharpness,” and paywalled scholarship, the inherent ableism of the academy will only continue to replicate itself. Academic structures will continue to deprioritize the existence of disabled bodies and minds, especially disabled people of color, while deriving capital from our knowledges. This special issue is an invitation to consider how praxis-based approaches can move us and our scholarship to the materiality of anti-racist, feminist, and disability methods as one way of doing justice—to avoid complacency by centering lived experience.

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Notes

1. Authors are co-first authors.
2. This concept has been discussed in many venues, including Kimberlé Crenshaw’s podcast (2020), *Intersectionality Matters* in the “Under the Blacklight” series, which was in conversation with Alicia Garza, Robin D.G. Kelley, Devon Carbado, Maria Moore, and Keith Ellison. Stephanie Bastek’s podcast (2020) *Smarty Pants*, also

talked about the “twin pandemics” in depth in the episode, “Twin Pandemics: A Conversation about COVID-19 and Racism with Philip Alcabes and Harriet Washington.”

3. We are influenced by Sara Ahmed’s (2017) discussion of citational politics.

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