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Accessibility

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## Feminisms and Disability Studies

Feminist Studies, of course, encompasses a wide array of applied “feminisms”—from the theories of aesthetics and cultural studies to the realities of politics and history. What the vigorous literature on relations between Feminisms and the relatively new area of Disability Studies indicates for the future of both disciplines in theoretical and practical terms is still in flux; however, for this brief literature review, I offer a broad taxonomy for the new intersectional sub-field of Feminist Disability Studies (or FDS for brevity) and address some representative articles while recognizing that scholars may address several designated areas of FDS simultaneously:<sup>i</sup>

- A General Theory of Disability, in development with a Feminist Philosophy, from which beliefs and values underpinning cultural and scholarly questions from epistemology and science to the arts and politics can be reexamined in light of current scholarship and research in genetics, bio-ethics, and gender studies.
  - An Epistemology of (Dis)Ability that addresses for theories and practices the functional limitations of the disabled, including how material limitations in body and environment determine epistemological concerns regarding meanings assigned to individual and social actions, assignments that often serve as paradigmatic axioms for the humanities and social sciences.

- Work in Identity, Identities (and the aftermath of Identity Politics) in conjunction with disability issues concerning national identity and nationalism, also addressing questions of ethics and politics.
- Depictions and narratives of disabled women (especially concerning issues of embodiment and materiality) and how more cohesive relations between feminisms and disability studies generally may expose the limitations of previous anti-ableist and anti-sexist agendas. This area would include a general aesthetics for framing disability representations developed in conjunction with examinations of visual and narrative depictions.
- Ethics—Caregiving—Bioethics: expressing mutual concerns for issues surrounding the rights of the caregivers and the disabled that are still problematic, the problematized concern of how a feminist bioethics premised on a woman's right to make decisions about her body can be informed by a history of disability haunted with eugenic pogroms and current issues surrounding genetic testing, abortion options, and environmentalist concerns.

## GENERAL THEORY

Perhaps because a General Feminism, more so than other critical/interpretative approaches, has been more skeptical of traditional (i.e. patriarchal) presuppositions regarding epistemological constructs, notions of embodiment, subject/object equations, and expanding civil rights concepts, it is the most logical access point at which the discipline of disability has entered a broader discussion in the humanities and social sciences. An overview of key articles and scholars in the field

would include references to proto writings of the 70s & 80s, early foundational works of the 80s & 90s, and selections from an expansive array of current trends.<sup>ii</sup>

In the foundational “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson lays out four domains of feminist theory (the body, representation, identity, and activism) to show how the realized field of feminist disability studies might transform established areas in feminist studies. In her explicative “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” Garland-Thomson “aims to amplify feminist theory by articulating and fostering feminist disability theory” to “[set] an agenda for future work in feminist disability theory” (3) and insightfully claims that “integrating disability into feminist theory is generative, broadening [scholarly] collective inquiries, questioning our assumptions, and contributing to feminism’s intersectionality” and that “feminist disability theory’s radical critique hinges on a broad understanding of disability as a pervasive cultural system that stigmatizes certain kinds of bodily variations” (5).

In “Toward a Full-Inclusion Feminism: A Feminist Deployment of Disability Analysis” (2005) Judy Rohrer explains that “by full-inclusion feminism [she aspires] toward a theory and praxis that considers disability subjectivities and knowledges in fluid relationships to all other forms of subjectivity and knowledge” (35), relying on a social (rather than outdated charity or medical models) of disability that “recognizes the complex interactions between sociopolitical structures, space, time, and specific bodies, minds, and senses that produce disability” (38). She sees the notion of interdependence as an addition to a feminist ethics of care (in reaction to a Western cultural imperative of individuality) since “living with a disability or relating to someone with a disability clarifies

how interrelated our lives really are, how much we socially and politically need each other “ (47). ) In addition to the FDS imperative, one might also include a need to “elaborate the materialities of thought, being, and community that must succeed atomistic conceptions of persons as disembodied, individually constituted, and autonomous” (Intemann et al. 927) so that a comprehensive and cohesive FDS could be both politically pragmatic and socio-scientifically grounded in quantitative studies and histories.

### EPISTEMOLOGY AND IDENTITIES

Questions of meaning within culturally-bound academic identities both imposed and internalized are relatively late to mature since mapping the development of sub-fields first demands that general theories and generalizable research/scholarship cohere in relation with associated fields before final consequences of ideas and findings determine how the sub-field defines itself as a coherent body of knowledge. What that means now is that questions regarding how the study of a Feminist Disability literature defines itself must remain open-ended rather than rhetorical. One indication that the field is developing is indicated by a second edition of the reader *Feminist Disability Studies* since new editions (as in the case of *The Disability Studies Reader*) always indicate an increasing interest by scholars and students and a financial demand for relevant materials. Some questions and answers lie, however, in the ability of major players in the approach of a Disability Feminism to draw on current interdisciplinary trends.

Garland-Thomson in “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept” (2011) offers a new critical term of *misfit* “that seeks to defamiliarize and to reframe dominant understandings of disability” (592) and speaks of a “materialist feminist understanding of disability by extending a consideration of how the particularities of embodiment interact with their environment in its broadest sense, to include both its spatial and temporal aspects” (594). Disability, here therefore, embodied as both material particularity and spatiotemporal agent, may go further in creating identities and meaning than can the normative, resulting in an epistemology grounded in not fitting, in mis-fitting, in difference rather than sameness (cf. Derrida). Writing in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2005, Garland-Thomson continues claims for a transformative alignment of fields not only for Feminism but also for disability studies since “feminist disability studies reimagines disability” (1557) by viewing disability “as a system of exclusions that stigmatizes human differences” that uncovers communities and identities that the bodies we consider disabled have produced,” that “reveals discriminatory attitudes and practices directed at those bodies,” that “exposes disability as a social category of analysis,” and “frames disability as an effect of power relations” (1557).

The issue of analysis and power relations within the psychiatric community stemming from applications of academic psychological concepts for the female mind to real-life situations has been addressed by some in the FDS field. For instance, Michelle Lunn & Robyn Munford “explore some of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of research in the disability field” (66) and power relations research outcomes by exploring a previous study by Lunn that suggests “non-disabled responses

to, and assumptions about disability, often begin with inaccurate assumptions about disabled identities” (70). They draw on both feminist theory and Foucault, “to understand the discursive construction of disability... how power relations work to produce disabled subjects” and encourage researchers to look to the practical outcomes of their research practice” (76). Since disability identity, perhaps more than that of race or ethnicity or sexual orientation, is so closely conscribed both for the identifier and identified with modern medical nomenclature and methodologies, issues of power relations will continue to be played out in the everyday settings as much as in academic dialogues. In line with this assumption are the conclusions of Andrea Nicki that “psychiatric disability is informed by trauma, marginalization, sexist norms, social inequalities, concepts of irrationality and normalcy, oppositional mind-body dualism, and mainstream moral values” (16) and that since differing behavior norms for women and mental illness labels used to maintain social control are well documented in feminist histories, “there needs to be less talk of failures to realize ideals of rationality and autonomy and human paradigms of normalcy and intelligibility...[and]...more emphasis on the achievements both of those challenging oppressive social systems who are typically seen as ‘crazy radicals’ and of those with abuse-related psychiatric disabilities who have been told far too many times through actions, words, or silence that they are worthless” (99).

## REPRESENTATIONS & ETHICS

So far, the number and range of applied writings within FDS in literature, art, and history is impressive, so I’ll just touch on a couple of major issues here. On a side note, I intend that my working paper (an analysis within a Feminist Disability framework of

artifacts on Hillary Clinton to speak towards a need for increased emphasis on popular culture images of powerful female figures by a feminism transformed via a disability consciousness so that the sexist pitfalls of many media representations can be addressed) fit into this area of “applied” FDS theory.

Judith Butler’s status as a cultural theorist and philosopher in Feminism places her ideas on gender and disability at the center of a growing FDS and much writing on gender and disability as social constructions either expands or reacts to Butler. Ellen Samuels in “elucidating the usefulness and limitations of applying Butler's work to disability but also with this inquiry's relevance to the larger struggle for legitimacy and power by the emerging field of disability studies” (Kindle Location 619) insightfully points out that a Butlerian approach to gender, sexuality, and body does not easily incorporate a disability factor since merely replacing the notion of “gender” with that of “disability” creates a feminism in which the disabled is always an abnormal feature for the female subject. Also, many scholars who focus on the cultural negotiations of the physical body find Butler's work inapplicable and perhaps dangerous to their own critical concerns.” (Samuels, Kindle Locations 747-748).

Garland-Thomson (responding to physicist-feminist Karen Barad) refers to the tension between a direction in FDS toward materiality, how “what has come recently to be called material feminism provides conceptual language that expands the idea of the social construction of reality toward a material-discursive understanding of phenomena and matter” and how “this corrective move shifts...concepts such as Butlerian performativity toward the material and away from the linguistic-semiotic-interpretive turn in critical theory” (“Feminist Disability” 592). However, given the theoretical presences of

Butler in recent FDS, any move towards a materiality framework must account for Butler's broad paradigm of gender and power however complex the fit.

Scholarship that addresses the disabled and/or female body (and mind) from a FDS perspective must make sure that focused applications and analyses operate within a general framework of both current theories of materiality and post-structuralist foundations of culture-bound epistemologies, whether applied to issues of representation or ethics. Such work is being done by Alexa Schriempf, who calls for an "interactionist paradigm" to address the problem of "materialist and constructivist approaches to bodies that do not recognize the interaction between 'sex' and 'gender' and 'impairment' and 'disability' as material-semiotic" (53). Nirmala Erevelles explores issues of citizenship and citizenship education partly using a materialist disability approach; Ann Fox uses FDS to address issues in feminist narratives and physical theatre; Elizabeth J. Donaldson and Catherine Prendergast speak to the reality of female emotion in relation to disability situations and academic dialogue; Susan Stocker writes of a genetic, non-contingent versus a genealogical, contingent, Butlerian account of human embodiment for FDS. Valerie Ann Johnson speaks of a Feminist Disability Studies in alignment with related interests in Environmental Justice; Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson writes on rhetoricity of the severely mentally disabled to question how a mental disabilities framework influences our ideas of rhetoric itself. Bente Meyer helped initiate the early emerging intersection of feminist research with queer and disability studies. Also worth mentioning is valuable scholarship via the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* and related work in professional philosophical by scholars such as Eva Feder Kittay and Anita Silvers. My working paper on images of Hillary Clinton read

from a FDS perspective will draw mostly on writings loosely falling under the issues of female representations and political advertising issues, although as I've indicated materiality and post-structuralist gender theories must serve as a foundation to any analyses or speculations.

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<sup>i</sup> I draw on Anita Silvers entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for this taxonomy.

<sup>ii</sup> Current interests in the intersections between disability and other issues in wide-ranging disciplines are best exemplified by an upcoming special issue of *Hypatia: Feminist Disability Studies* (Deadline 15 August 2013) where highly specialized topics include :Disability and Phenomenology-- Disability, gender, race, class, and sexuality--Disability, national identity, and nationalism--Disability and posthumanism--Disability, ethics, and politics--Disability and globalization--Disability and environmentalism, ecology, ecofeminism, and/or queer ecology--Disability, feminist materialism, and “agential realism”--Disability and the meaning and/or experience of sex and gender, transgender, and intersex--Disability and orientation/ reorientation/ disorientation of understandings of time and space--Disability and critical analyses of science, scientific knowledge, nature, and human nature--The meaning of art and aesthetic concepts through the lens of disability--Rethinking the canon of western philosophy through the lens of feminist disability studies