A "Visibilizing" Project:
"Seeing" the Ontological Erasure of Disability in Teacher Education and Social Studies Curricula

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Who's (Still) Not Here Yet?[1]

IN OUR CONSIDERATION OF THE QUINTESSENTIAL QUESTIONS of "What knowledge is of most worth? Who decides? Who benefits?" we have arrived at a concept that we name *ontological erasure.* This concept goes beyond the absence of disability from curricular content, or silence around disability in educational justice frameworks—but rather is the active erasing of certain body-minds from "being" in the educational landscape. In this paper we trace a path through scholarly work in disability studies in education that identifies the places where the absence of disability within critical and intersectional frameworks remains glaring. We then turn our gaze to teacher education and critical social studies as sites of *erasure*, in order to posit our argument that classrooms and curriculum play necropolitical and oppressive roles in disabled people's lives. Throughout, we rely on Campbell's (2008) assertion of "studies in ableism" as a tool with which "to shift our gaze and concentrate on what the study of disability tells us about the production, operation and maintenance of ableism" (para 1). And, we conclude by describing a "visibilizing" project, guided by Hedva's (2016) Sick Woman Theory, through which it is possible and necessary for disabled people to become sites of political power and knowledge in their very existence by asserting and validating their knowledge of themselves and their world.

Over the last decade-plus, scholars in disability studies in education (DSE) have noted curricular absences and advocated for the inclusion of disability-related content within P-12 and post-secondary curricular contexts (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017; Baglieri & Ware, 2012; Connor & Valle, 2017; Gabel & Connor, 2009; Valle & Connor, 2010; Ware, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2018). Further, specific texts in DSE have emerged that articulate a range of practice-based and theoretical considerations for education, in the shift from traditional notions of disability to DSE (see, for example: Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017; Cosier & Ashby, 2016; Danforth, 2017; Valle & Connor, 2010). Noting the limitations of embedding DSE content into teacher education because of national

standards tied to medicalized, deficit-based ways of viewing disability, Baglieri and Ware (2012), for example, offer two strategies for the inclusion of disability curriculum on a college campus—such that disability is not considered "additive" or tacked onto the end of a long list of identity markers, but rather, disability is solidly positioned alongside intersectional identities or asserted as the framework through which to interrogate and construct meaning.

As some DSE scholars have continued to articulate and identify the spaces and places where disability has been historically absent in curricular contexts, other DSE scholarship has simultaneously emerged that notes the absence of disability from social justice work in education that addresses both intersectional experiences and other critical silences (Connor & Gabel, 2010; Gabel & Connor, 2009; Ware, 2011, 2018). As cited by Gabel and Connor (2009), Gallagher (2004) offered an important, and yet unrealized, observation over a decade ago of previous decades' work in DSE:

> for more than a decade vigorous discussion has taken place among educators in special education and disability studies…that, despite its importance, has had relatively few participants…this conversation is of crucial importance because it confronts the fundamental frameworks within which the debates over full inclusion, disability definitions, labeling, and the like are deliberated. (p. vii)

Gabel and Connor (2009) additionally offer this significant insight: few outside of special education or DSE have demonstrated an interest in the rights of disabled students, despite the project of DSE being "a radical one that irritates tradition through its critiques of educational inequity and questioning the commonplace" (p. 386). Somehow, the connections to broader social justice (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009; Hackman, 2006), multicultural education (Banks, 2012; Nieto, 2000), and human rights education (Baxi, 1994; Grant & Gibson, 2013; Keet, 2013; Tibbitts, 2002) still remain tenuous, at best. DSE scholars continue to be virtually solitary voices present in advocating for disability inclusion in these spaces, despite the reduction of prejudice and discrimination as an identified objective of social justice education and progressive multicultural education.

Structuring the Theory of Ontological Erasure

By articulating the absence of disability from dialogues about diversity and marginalization in education, this conceptual paper investigates the ways in which disability has been systemically erased—more than silenced—on an ontological level from two fields wherein curriculum creation impacts not just content mastery, but what sources of knowledge are considered valid and worthy of study: teacher education and critical social studies (CSS). In teacher education, separate systems of preparing pre-service teachers are based on the binary of the "special" and "regular" student, reifying and reinforcing constructions of the "Other" about disabled students and those teachers who can/should teach them (Collins, 2013; Reid & Valle, 2004). Concerned with "silences and exclusions that have plagued social studies," CSS asserts that methods of teaching history should become more investigative, "inclusive and complex" (Jewett, 2007, p. 169). CSS further inculcates in its students "a concern for otherness…equity, and individual agency" (Klassen, 1997, pp. iii-iv).

These fields are probed to illustrate the genesis of *ontological erasure*, which we define as going beyond the *absence* of disability from curricular content or the *silence* regarding disability in educational justice conversations; rather, *ontological erasure* is the active erasing of certain body-minds from "being" in the educational landscape. This shift from considerations of *absence* or *silence,* which both imply passivity and neglect, to an analysis that arrives at the concept of *ontological erasure*, which is explicitly active, although not necessarily malicious, is significant as it denotes issues of agency and power, as well as the possibility of purposeful change. *Ontological erasure*, then, encapsulates the ways ableism creates societal norms that say disabled people cannot possibly be sources of knowledge because they lack, fundamentally, the ability to possess knowledge about themselves or the world. They are often viewed as already dead, as non-entities incapable of taking in or producing information, because they "were never meant to survive but did," to borrow the language of disabled scholar Johanna Hedva's (2016) Sick Woman Theory. Her theory—which critiques the way disabled bodies are policed and judged in society, alongside the ways disabled people resist nondisabled norms and forge unique ways of moving through, thinking about, and protesting the nondisabled world—is instrumental to understanding how curriculum plays a necropolitical and oppressive role in disabled people's lives.

To make visible how ontological erasure has impacted curriculum studies, we first note early critiques of the absence of disability from broad, disciplinary inclusion discussions and the resulting "normal/disabled" binary that pervades education and educational practices. We then address this form of ableism within teacher education and utilize our understanding of "studies in ableism" to explain our stance that disability is and should be centered as a source of knowledge and cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). We foreground the example of CSS since its goals of making social studies more inclusive, participatory, and anti-oppressive are aligned with DSE (Haworth, 2007), though the field does not analyze how disability has fundamentally affected who is considered human and who or what is worth learning about on a historical scale. The gaps in teacher education and CSS demonstrate how disability came to be erased from social justice scholarship in the U.S. and outline the necessity of further interdisciplinary research in disability studies in education.

A Disability Studies Perspective on the Enforcement and Expectation of Normality

Early on, scholars in humanities-based disability studies (DS) have articulated well the absence of disability from disciplinary (and, thus, curricular) spaces (for example, see: Garland-Thomson, 1997; Kudlick, 2003; Linton, 1998; Longmore, 2003). Further, the burgeoning field of humanities-based DS has long-positioned disability as an important tool for analysis, to uncover deeply entrenched, taken for granted conceptions of "normal," and the maintenance of binary distinctions that arise from this. Along these lines Baynton (2001) notes:

> Normality is a complex concept…it has been used in a remarkable range of contexts and with a bewildering variety of connotations. The natural and the normal both are ways of establishing the universal, unquestionable good and right. Both are also ways of establishing social hierarchies that justify the denial of legitimacy and certain rights to individuals or groups. (p. 35)

Thus, the Other exists in binary opposition to the "normate" (Garland-Thomson, 1997)—the idealized conception of the body-mind. And, as Goodley (2014, citing Michalko, 2002) argued, the problem of disability is firmly tied to the upholding of idealized body-minds and their "monstrous alternatives" (p. 13). The idea of disability as monstrous is perhaps why society has "the impulse to cast disability as an 'unlivable life'" (Baglieri & Ware, 2012, p. 115) and has erased disabled people's roles in civil rights history, literary movements, and technological developments in the U.S. for hundreds of years. As noted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, disabled people are "left behind in society," and this systemic enfreakment is perhaps why (BBC News, 2017).

Despite the proliferation of DS scholarship in disciplinary spaces outside of education, and emerging work that advances disability within bio-ethics considerations (see, for example: Garland-Thomson, 2017; Taylor, 2017; Zahid, 2017) and community-based scholarship (see, for example: Berne, 2015; Moore, 2017), there is a glaring absence of the topic of disability in critical conversations in social justice education and multicultural curriculum (Lalvani & Broderick, 2015). Broderick and Lalvani (2017) add an important dimension to the breadth of work articulating spaces of curricular (absence/silence) possibility by including disability through their concept of *dysconscious ableism*. They define dysconscious ableism as the "limitations and distortions of most teachers' consciousness of the existence of—let alone the workings of—ableist oppression [that] make[s] it difficult for them to create and enact equitable, liberatory, and just education practices for all students" (p. 2). Thus, they identify the hegemonic power of ways of thinking about disability that "tacitly accept dominant ableist norms and privileges" (p. 2). We argue that the resultant desire to erase body-minds that cannot achieve "normalcy" happens through practices of segregation and subjugation—within P-12 schools and curriculum, as well as within university-level teacher education.

Campbell's (2008) work advancing "studies in ableism" allows us "to shift our gaze and concentrate on what the study of disability tells us about the production, operation and maintenance of ableism" (para 1). This contributed to our move from absence/silence to *ontological erasure*—which is more than the result of the absences/silences long articulated in DS scholarship, enforcing a continued reliance on the resulting binary distinctions—normal/abnormal, regular/special—that fill educational landscapes. Rather than noting absences to fill with curriculum, or silences to fill with arguments for disability inclusion, we instead choose to note the ableist conclusion of these as *erasure*.

A Historical Perspective on the Erasure of "Abnormality"

Surveying the history of disability in the United States shows the genesis of ableism from the 19th century to the present day, and uncovering how this history is represented in the classroom—conceptualized an "incubator of national consciousness" (Lovell, 2006, p. 70)—illustrates how historical representations promulgate ableist mindsets. This survey takes on Linton's (1998) call to action that "people across the disciplines…study the consequences of constructing a knowledge base within which [ableist] social positioning is deemed rational and morally sound" (p. 72). The consequence of historical ableism, by the definitions put forth in this paper, is ontological erasure.

Teachers and teacher educators in U.S. schools work in a system born out of the rationalist, science and industry-focused 19th century, an age during which personhood, citizenship, and

intellectualism were defined in defiance to difference, and disability was seen as an illness to be cured rather than a natural part of human life (Benedek, 2012; Nielsen, 2012; Schweik, 2009). Society and its institutions developed a symbiotic relationship with ableism: spectacles and pseudo-scientific treatments of disabled people became more extreme, so the bystander became not just more normal, but more powerful (Garland-Thomson, 1996, p. 3). Profiting off people's combined fascination and disgust with disability, social Darwinists, such as Baron Georges Cuvier and Carl Vogt, convinced non-disabled freak show onlookers to fear and revile markers of racial and bodily difference (Clare, 1999, p. 95). Disabled people were made visible only in segregated spaces as specimens of wrongness, and the more people feared disability, the more they endeavored to police disabled bodies through educational segregation, scientific experimentation, and court-sanctioned murder (Garland-Thomson, 1996, p. 4). Erasing disability from social life became the first step in erasing disability from conceptions of humanity and knowledge.

The popularity of eugenics in this disability-fearing society led parents to relinquish their disabled children to eugenicists for experimental surgeries (Byrom, 2001; Kafer, 2013) and murder them through "mercy killings" or euthanasia (Brockley, 2001). Those who survived this hostile environment either entered a school system "entrusted with controlling, diagnosing, and policing difference" or a school system that legally excluded disabled students from enrollment (Ferri & Connor, 2007, pp. 24-29). Rather than integrating them into the schoolhouse, families, doctors, and lawyers sent disabled children to segregated "residential schools, day schools, and 'hospital schools'" where doctors and nurses took the place of teachers (Longmore & Umansky, 2011, p. 3). Backlash against *Brown* v. *Board of Education* (1954) led to white politicians and school boards across the U.S. further segregating and tracking students based on arguments that paralleled those of freak-show directors and social Darwinists so "students were technically being 'included' in the school, [though] they were barely going to be breathing the same air as the other students" (Ferri & Connor, 2007, p. 7). Nondisabled people controlled the means of producing and receiving knowledge, in turn erasing disabled people's voices from the creation of knowledge. School, then, ultimately became a place for disabled people to be taught how to acquiesce to their oppression and not a place for them to learn about their history because, "[as] a microcosm of society, classrooms and schools represent the degree to which knowledge and individuals are valued" (Ferri & Connor, 2007, p. 127). Disabled body-minds became fundamentally devalued in the normative space of U.S. education. This is in part due to the segregation of disability in spaces like special education, wherein students' identities are systematically repressed in an effort to produce rehabilitated, normalized subjects (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Linton, 1998).

Mbembe's (2003) theory of necropolitics underscores how this 19th century medical model instigated the ontological erasure of disability. By positioning disabled body-minds as defective, the medical model denies them humanity and participation in the demos, as they are considered to lack "self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-representation" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 13). Herein is the first prong of ontological erasure: denying that a person has the physical, spiritual, or mental capacity to know the world. The medical model became popularized through eugenics and social Darwinism, which "divided [people] into either healthy or diseased classes," so the death of disabled people was not only acceptable, but was also seen as progress (Ferri & Connor, 2007, p. 27). This is the second prong: killing (or miseducating) those who have been labeled incapable of possessing or producing knowledge so they cannot even attempt to overcome oppressive social systems and stereotypes.

Disability History, Erased: A Theoretical Sampling of Historical Teaching Materials

Though the intricate social and scientific history of disability in the U.S. has been rediscovered and reframed by DS scholars, the lessons from these events are largely confined to DS spaces and are erased from mainstream curriculum. Furthering Linton's (1998) statement that "the reification of *normal* and *abnormal* structures curriculum" (p. 24), a theoretical sampling of three teaching guides and two history textbooks (microcosms of CSS teacher education) illustrate how disability is absent from social studies curricula, constituting a form of ontological erasure that perpetuates ableism by overlooking disabled people as historical actors whose lives were part of the fabric of American life (Steinborn, 2017).[2]

In *California Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (CCCSS, 2013), only two disability keywords surfaced out of the document's 98 pages. Those two words, illness and disease, appeared in the same sentence on page 49: "Taking care of your body: Germs, diseases, and preventing illness" (CCCSS, 2013). A less standard and more progressive online resource, *Teaching a People's History – Zinn Education Project*, fell into the same pattern (Teaching a People's History, 2017). While disability keyword searches fruited zero results, equity merited five, equality merited 10, and justice merited a whopping 74 unique results. In dissecting a hard copy index of Howard Zinn's (2003), *A People's History of the United States*, none of the aforementioned keywords appeared, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was mentioned only once. Of this sample, the teaching guide most peppered with references to disability keywords was Los Angeles Unified School District's (n.d.) *11th Grade US History and Geography: Continuity and Change in the 20th Century* document. In its 345 pages, disabled appears three times, disease twice, mental three times, and blind once. Of these nine references, six are actually about disability, while the other three use disability as a descriptor ("color-blind" (p. B-5), "mental violence" (p. 12-21) and "students are either empowered, or alternately, disabled" (p. 1-6)).

In manually reviewing the glossaries and indexes of two textbook sources, *America: History of Our Nation* published in 2007 by Pearson Prentice Hall (Davidson & Stoff, 2007) and *The American Vision* published in 2007 by McGraw-Hill, Inc. (Appleby, Brinkley, Broussard, McPherson, & Ritchie, 2007), the trend of disability erasure continued. In both texts, the sole explicit reference to people with disabilities appeared in one paragraph related to the Americans with Disabilities Act. Neither text described the decades of social activism that resulted in the passage of the ADA or specified the multitude of individuals involved in the law's initial formulation. *America* noted that disabled people's activism and disability rights organizations led to public accommodations and that Congress passed legislation for people with "handicaps" and "impairments" (Davidson & Stoff, 2007, p. 897). In addition to there being no other direct or indirect references to disability in either text, both defined no forms of prejudice besides racism (such as sexism, classism, or ableism), and both defined integration and segregation only in relation to race, while a disability analysis shows the importance of defining both terms in relation to excluding people on a variety of often-intersecting identity characteristics, including disability, gender, class, and religion.

Investigating this small sample of texts shows that disability is either completely erased from U.S. history or shown as dangerous, disease-related, and deficient. Ontological erasure is stemmed by this removal of disability from the historical record; when students are taught that disability does not exist in history, they are made illiterate in discussions of how disability does exist in the present. The nondisabled body-mind is, thus, centered as the only way of understanding

the past or creating the future; disabled body-minds are positioned as void of historical agency and knowledge, as lacking the "self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-representation" that citizens of a societal body are expected to possess (Mbembe, 2003, p. 13). Problematizing this, we advocate a visibilizing project, whereby disability is recentered as a site of knowledge, historically and in the present, and social studies is used as a *transformational based system* dedicated to "transforming the minds and lives of the students and community stakeholders" and "[critiquing] official knowledge" (Blevins & Talbert, 2016, pp. 23-24).

Conceptualizing the Future of "Visibilizing" Projects

According to Sick Woman Theory, disabled people manifest "self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-representation" through the act of claiming their right to life (Hedva, 2016, n.p.). By surviving when society was built to prevent their survival, disabled people become sites of political power and knowledge in their very existence, working against normative conceptions of whose knowledge is valuable or worthy. This "visibilizing" project, then, requires that activism take place in disabled body-minds, disability-literate curricula, and radically inclusive classrooms. Rather than situating this activism and ontology "in the street" (Arendt, 1958) or the industrial confines of the general education classroom, disability-ontology is situated in the body and with community. The body and the community are reframed as syllabi—not for the purpose of delineating normal/abnormal boundaries or advancing curative science, but for the purpose of asserting and validating disabled people's knowledge of themselves and their world. Visibilizing disability-ontology can then be understood as engaging in the "creative process of turning everyday activities into strategies of rebellion" (Anyon, 2005, p. 143).

With the goal of visibilizing disability in anti-oppressive multicultural curricula, human rights can be used as a tool to create interest convergence by foregrounding commonalities between disabled people and other marginalized communities, all of whom are dedicated to securing their rights to life, freedom, education, safety, and cultural expression, and all of whom cross paths in education and scholarship (Bell, 1980; UNGA, 1948). The interest convergence that brought the Black Panthers, Delancey Street Foundation, and Butterfly Brigade to the 1977 Section 504 sit-ins (O'Toole, 2015) can again bring scholars together from different disciplines, for the achievements of one group can and should have ripple effects for others.

Human rights education (HRE), which holds transformative action and social change as core tenets and sees the right to education as paramount (Bajaj, 2011; Tibbitts, 2002), is just one example of an anti-oppressive multicultural discipline wherein disability can and should be visibilized. HRE is fundamentally about the inalienable social, cultural, and political rights of all people, so from a human rights perspective, disabled people claiming their right to life is a transformative social, cultural, and political act that not only requires, but also proves, metacognition. Claiming personhood requires people to think about who they are, as well as what their existence means and what rights it entails and, as such, proves that disabled people have a stake in society's ontology.

Traditional conceptions of knowledge and being are uprooted through this incorporation of disability because scholars are forced to renegotiate their proximity to power and broaden their largely Western definitions of intelligence and logic. By claiming personhood and infiltrating new areas of academia, "disabled people…push against dominance while also…[pulling] society into disabled people's way of seeing" (Gabel & Peters, 2004, pp. 594-595). This dissolves the

"smart/not smart" binary to which much of education implicitly ascribes and creates an opening for collaboration between educators in previously segregated disciplines, like general and special education (Weiss & Pellegrino, 2016, p. 189). In these acts of rebellion, disabled people's and communities' cultural wealth is born.

Notes

1. This is a response to the title of Burch and Sutherland's (2006) paper in *Radical History Review*, "Who's Not Yet Here? American Disability History."
2. Parts of this section previously appeared in the co-author's unpublished master's thesis; see Steinborn (2017).

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