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# Disability Plots: Curriculum, Allegory, & History

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THE FIRST HIGH SCHOOL where I began my career as a social studies educator in Indiana offered an elective course called “Ethnic Studies.” By its official course description from the state, the Ethnic Studies course is meant to offer “a comparative approach to the study of patterns of cultural development, immigration, and assimilation” with a focus on “specific ethnic or cultural groups” (Indiana Department of Education, 2018). In 2003, my school’s principal at the time asked the social studies department to expand the course’s curricular scope to cover the history of all minority groups in the United States. My principal requested the course add to its curriculum some instruction on the history of lesbian, gay, and other minority sexualities, as well as the history of people with disabilities in the United States.

I remember our professional conversations well because they were interesting to me, especially at a time when teachers and administrators could (and did) talk deeply about issues of curriculum and course design, a time that was then on the eve of our current obsession with testing, accountability, and scripted standardized curricula. A debate ensued over whether the Ethnic Studies course was the best curricular fit for inclusion of these two different historical narratives: of sexual orientation and disability as markers of identity. While the instructors wanted to include the newly suggested content, they suggested that those histories are not ethnic histories. An attention to intersectional ways of thinking and teaching would have helped broaden the conversation to perhaps alter this perspective. Nonetheless, the instructors and administrator decided that a course titled Ethnic Studies is not the same thing as a course on the history of minority groups in the United States. This episode offers an image of what the intersection of curriculum studies (what knowledge is of most worth?) and disability studies (how is our knowledge shaped by normality, impairment, and dis/able-embodiment?) makes possible for teachers to consider teaching.

This intersection underscores a crucial upside to the debate we had over the proposed curriculum change: a new realization that the history of people with disabilities—and the history of how disabilities have been framed, supported, ignored, criminalized, vilified, pathologized, and recognized throughout the history of the United States—required necessary inclusion in the course all of our students took on the history of the United States. Today, 15 years later, now a professor and teacher educator of both curriculum studies and social studies education, I help my students

see how such histories are often excluded or marginalized in our conversations and curriculum in social studies education. In this article, I share how bringing theoretical approaches from disability studies, curriculum studies, and philosophy of history intersect to bring teachers' attention to how we position the experiences of, and discourses about, people with disabilities in the various narratives we recreate about "America" and U.S. national history.

To do so, I apply Pinar's (2015) curriculum theory of allegory to explain how historical narratives of disability can be read as "a specific story that hints at a more general significance" (p. 27). The specific stories of disability that appear in the curriculum of social studies education performatively do different things. In order to define and frame the performativity of the historical narratives of disability I share in this article, I turn to White (2010, 2014) and his method of uncovering the various ways we emplot the past through the histories we narrate. I share examples of disability histories taught in classrooms to argue that these are historical allegories of our present thoughts on disability (Pinar, 2015), with each narrative following a specific curricular mode of emplotment, ranging from romance and tragedy to epic, horror, and more. The article offers the fields of curriculum studies and social studies some implications for its practice in terms of how we can teach better "critiques of labeling, stigmatization, and the medicalization" of disability, which appears in our curriculum so often "wrapped in stereotypes and stigma" (Taylor, 2016, pp. xviii-xix).

### Finding Disability in the History Curriculum

During my doctoral studies in curriculum theory, I began teaching courses in social studies education, which, early on in the experience, alerted me through a critical consciousness of how most middle and high school social studies textbooks for U.S. History courses pedagogically frame disability, which is to say they include and frame such narratives minimally at best and are fully absent at worst. For example, in the first edition of a new high school textbook, *American History* (HMH Social Studies, 2018), the only instances of disability making a specific appearance are in two chapter sections: one on Dorothea Dix and reforming sanitariums and asylums (pp. 311-312) and another in a section on "rights for Americans with disabilities" with a document-based historical source sidebar reading "from the Americans with Disabilities Act" (pp. 1112-1113).

Dissatisfied with the scant coverage and lack of resources ready at hand to share with my students as they began their teaching careers, I sought more materials to supplement our curriculum planning. A fellow graduate student at the time recommended Nielsen's (2012) *A Disability History of the United States* to better inform and arrange how I thought of historical narratives of disability in the U.S. Across her book's eight chapters, Nielsen constructs a chronology of how disability appears through the lives of those who have occupied what we now call the United States. Nielsen's critically oriented history uses narratives of people with disabilities to call attention to how political, bureaucratic, and policed forms of governance, coupled with capitalism and industrialization, shaped dominant views of, and ways of talking about, normality, disability, and difference in the United States.

While Nielsen does make brief references to both Helen Keller and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, two individuals I discuss in the following sections, the majority of the book calls attention to names, places, movements, and legislation that I and my students had not learned, such as Mary Phipps, considered to be an "idiot" in need of protection in 17<sup>th</sup> century New England, whose biography helps us understand how "poor people deemed insane, and those violent or

uncontrollable, became a community responsibility,” instantiating early national discourses about disability (Nielsen, 2012, p. 25). My students also learn how public attitudes and approaches to disability change throughout the nation’s history. Nielsen suggests that the “Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818 established disability as a legal and social welfare category,” an act that presages the kind of activism and protest over rights, access, and equity for peoples with disabilities in the United States that unfolded over the new two centuries (Nielsen, 2012, p. 54).

The work of disability historians, such as Nielsen, as well as work by disability theorists my students read, such as Garland-Thomson (2009), Goodley (2011), and Thomas (2007), all help inform their understanding (and mine) that how we talk and think about disability changes based upon the context of why we talk and think about disability. This can appear in certain times through a frame of regulation, “we are what we are,” and at other times through a frame of resistance, “we are what we do not want to be,” two of many possible ways to frame disability’s relationship with the status quo, accommodation, assimilation, domination, and emancipation as potential ways of being in society (Goodley, 2011, p. 51).

### **Theorizing Disability in History Curriculum as Allegory**

Once my students and I had a blueprint for what an inclusive curriculum could look like in a history course, we had to next ask what these history narratives do. What do they “want” or “demand” of the student who learns these narratives? This opened the way for us to take disability history and disability studies and enter into conversation with curriculum theory and curriculum studies. Pinar (2015) upholds the power of allegory to be a productive frame for theorizing curriculum, especially history, when he argues that “historical facts are primary, but it is their capacity to invoke our imagination that marks them as allegorical” (p. 28). What a historical fact, lesson, or curriculum topic might have meant in its original historical context enlarges and expands when encountered in the present.

We often think of allegory as a thinly veiled moralizing lesson: what you are reading or seeing means something other than or in addition to what it seems to mean. When we think of allegory as a mode of curriculum, it enables us to consider that what we teach through our curriculum has an *other* meaning, an *other* significance, opening a way to speak otherwise about what the knowledge that we learn through curriculum means or may mean. Considering curriculum as allegorical means acknowledging that the people, places, and ideas of the curriculum we select, construct, and share with students are “at once particular and symbolic, simultaneously historical and metahistorical, even mythological,” inviting us to “self-consciously incorporate the past into the present” (Pinar, 2015, p. 27).

Why is an allegorical theory of curriculum relevant for how we teach the history of disability in defining and enlivening people and their experiences in the United States? One way to answer this is to consider how Lesnik-Obserstein (2015) challenges essentialist ways of defining and discussing disability, whose disability theory questions how disability represented through concepts such as “agency” or “the body” often “rely on ideas of who ‘sees’ or ‘hears’ whom, and how and why” in changing social, cultural, political, and historical circumstances (pp. 3-4). This stance on learning the histories of people with disabilities then asks us to choose a particular allegorical method to use in unpacking and deconstructing the histories we teach. Out of many allegorical methods to use in theorizing curriculum with my students, I use White (2014) and his theory of emplotment that demonstrates the metahistorical aspects of narrating a historical account,

calling attention to the rhetorical effects, tropes, and ideological significance of emplotting histories in different modes of storytelling, the curricular modes that historians, history educators, students of history, and other consumers of history bring to our study and understanding of the past.

### **Disability Histories as Epic, Horror, Tragedy, and Romance**

These modalities, or modes, map on to the commonly encountered narrative modes we consume in literature, film, art, television, and theater, all of which are expressive mediums where we stage and encounter the past as history and where we encounter narratives of people with disabilities. I help my students see that there is an array of curricular modes from which we can conceptualize and emplot disability history narratives.

To begin, we see the epic mode used to emplot disability when we teach about former U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's life with polio, which he spent much of his presidency hiding from public view and knowledge. History educators often emplot Roosevelt's history with polio as a struggle or a fight, one in which he is a lone hero battling against debilitating effects of polio, often described as being "confined" to a wheelchair. Being the president during the Second World War amplifies the epic nature of Roosevelt, whose life allegorically serves as a lesson in the history curriculum for overcoming his partial paralysis and not allowing that disability to define his identity during his campaigns and presidential terms. It follows an epic mode of "beating the odds" and "winning" as a victor over disability as a force, condition, or essence of one's identity that is an obstacle to beat.

Alternately, one can emplot a disability history in the mode of horror. The history of eugenics, forced sterilization, and the murder of people with disabilities throughout the Western world in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—acutely presented when we teach the history of the Holocaust—is often taught using a curricular mode of horror. Indeed, some may claim the only word to accurately describe the history of eugenicist thought is horrific. Earlier this year, I accompanied a group of university students on a European tour to learn the history of the Holocaust. We required quite a bit of self-care and reparative group conversations after an emotionally devastating visit and lecture at the T4 memorial in Berlin, officially called the "Memorial and Information Centre for the Victims of the Nazi Euthanasia Programme." The *Aktion T4* program carried out the "euthanasia" (involuntary murder) of 70,000 mentally and physically disabled people immediately before and during the early stages of the Second World War (Reese, 2018). The allegorical nature of including this history in the curriculum, especially the often untaught history of eugenics in the United States, is meant to horrify us in the present to the unconscionable ways we once treated people with disabilities, avowing never to forget and never to treat people with disabilities this way again. By using fear, terror, and disgust to frighten and alert us allegorically to real danger in the present that could happen to us at any moment, horror works as a curricular mode to foreground disabilities histories through the abject and grotesque in the disability histories we emplot about brutal and dehumanizing histories of disability.

Related to the Holocaust is the specter of war and how we very often in history education shy away from addressing and confronting the consequences of war, conflict, injury, and disability, especially amongst veterans of wars. During a lesson I observed of a high school world history teacher for a year-long ethnographic research study I conducted in 2013, I was drawn to the

teacher's framing of how soldiers were disfigured and disabled through injuries sustained during combat in the First World War. To help give credence to his claim that the First World War should be understood through its scope of violence and brutality, the teacher, Mr. Bauer, reads aloud to his students a description of Andrew, a British soldier injured while fighting in the First World War as recounted in Margaret Rotowski's (1986) novel, *After the Dancing Days*. From the passage of the book Mr. Bauer reads, it describes Andrew as follows:

The only thing normal about him was his eyes, but even they were pulled out of shape. The rest of his face was red, as if it had been deeply sunburned, and all of his features were pulled downward, as if hot tears had run down and melted his face. His mouth had no lips. It looked as if someone had cut a slit where his mouth should be. (p. 47)

As Mr. Bauer reads aloud this description, his students make verbal responses that indicate disgust and revulsion to their mental images of the soldier. One student, Brett, blurts out that the description "is seriously messed up, for real." Another student, Peter, says aloud, "I would probably just kill myself if I looked like that." Upon hearing Peter's admission, Mr. Bauer admonishes Peter for an apparent lack of sympathy, suggesting Peter think "long and hard" about idealizing suicide in the face of disfigurement and disability. Mr. Bauer pushes Peter to consider what such voicing may mean for others who are disfigured or disabled in some perceptible way. Mr. Bauer goes on to explain that it must not have been easy for Andrew to be seen in public after his disfigurement. Crafting this history of disability through war in his lesson, Mr. Bauer employs his curriculum as a tragedy, an allegorical mode in which "there are no festive occasions, except false or illusory ones" that have a "somber resignation" through which humans cannot escape the inalterable limits imposed upon them by a harsh, unforgiving external world (White, 2014, p. 9). Allegorically Mr. Bauer's lesson uses the motif of a tragic fall from "normal" figurement and able-bodiedness to a tragic circumstance of suffering at the hands of an ill-fated combat assignment in the war.

As a final example, I share a lesson from my first year of teaching a high school interdisciplinary course in English and social studies for ninth-grade students, in which we studied texts, plays, films, and primary source documents about Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan. The traditional history, which is one I taught my students, narrates how Keller's family came into contact with Sullivan, a visually impaired teacher from the Perkins Institute for the Blind, who became Helen's teacher in 1887, teaching through Keller's blindness, deafness, and muteness to communicate through touch. Sullivan and Keller spent their lives together as Keller eventually traveled frequently as a writer and lecturer, gaining national acclaim as a celebrated advocate for improving conditions for people with disabilities. The historical narrative of Keller and her teacher, as both I learned it and later reproduced it through my teaching, is an example of emplotting disability histories as a romance. By romance we do not mean a conventional love story, but rather a much older conception of romance as an inspiring story of self-identification through "a triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness" (White, 2014, p. 9).

As I reflect on my teaching, I see how I emphasized the darkness that we often describe Keller experiencing through her inability to see, hear, and speak. The historical narrative I created for my students emplotted Keller's relationship with her family as antagonistic. This history followed a romantic emplotment of positioning Keller as being a problem, an obstacle—living with her must have been a struggle for her family, causing them to, at least, seek out the help

(initially suspect) from the teacher Annie Sullivan. As happens in many good romances, my students and I expressed empathy for Keller's parents, who clash over concerns of how best to "help" or "fix" Keller, as well as expressions of empathy for Sullivan, Keller's teacher. Keller herself often took a secondary role in this framing. My teaching positioned Keller and Sullivan as struggling together through a wilderness of sorts, clashing at first, and slowly working past their antagonism that evolves into a loving, nurturing relationship, achieving harmony as lifelong adult companions. Working on the allegorical level, this history of Keller and Sullivan I taught served to teach students about the virtues of hard work, compassion, teamwork, and perseverance. Keller "emerges" from her disability to live what some students would identify as a "normal" life.

I did not have this realization of my teaching until later in graduate school when I discovered, through reading critical studies of curriculum, that the historical narrative we teach about Keller often does engage, allegorically, in a form of hero-making. Indeed, Loewen (2007) points out the romantic allegorizing of Keller's life when he quotes from an education film about Keller's life, offering to its student viewers that the real takeaway from learning about Keller's life is,

to remind us of the wonder of the world around us and how much we owe those who taught us what it means, for there is no person that is unworthy or incapable of being helped, and the greatest service any person can make us is to help another reach true potential. (p. 12)

This is a striking case of using Keller's life and her disabilities (without ever acknowledging her agency and activism as an adult fighting for radical political causes) to engage in an allegorical mode of romance in which we tell that history to foreground a resurrection of sorts for a beleaguered protagonist "fighting to free itself from the forces of darkness, a redemption" (White, 2014, p. 152).

### Conclusion

In concluding this article, I end with referencing Loewen as an example of how to critically read against the grain in the allegorical modes we use to emplot the histories we teach about disability in our curricula. I return to the request made at the behest of my first school administrator, pushing for the inclusion of people with disabilities as a history worth teaching in the Ethnic Studies course. What I would offer now in a response to that administrator is what I offer readers in this article: a call to historicize our narratives of America as always embedded, inhabited, and occupied with competing perspectives of disability, narratives that emplot disability as a medical condition with tragic and romantic notions of cure, remedy, and chronic treatment, as well as a moral condition with tragic, romantic, epic, and horrifying visions of disability.

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