

Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

Article/Essay Title: The Discourse of Pathology: Reproducing the Able Mind through Bodies of Color

Author: Ashley Taylor

Readability: Easy/Moderate/Difficult

Thesis:

“The ideal of ‘able-mindedness’ functions to maintain racial divisions and inequalities through attributions of cognitive and psychiatric disability to bodies of color” (181).

In other words, norms of able-mindedness support a system of social control that disproportionately disadvantages women and people of color. Academics—even feminist philosophers—are especially committed to these norms, and thereby enable oppression.

Key Definitions:

The Discourse of Pathology: *“racialized and nonnormatively gendered bodies are identified and interpreted through norms of able-mindedness and used as markers against which the ideal of the able mind is upheld” (181)*

Mental Disability: The author uses this term in a special way, to designate the *perceived* lack of an able mind (183). “Mental disability” encompasses ideas about psychiatric illness, cognitive disability, and lack of intelligence.

Cognitive Ableism: *“a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of individuals who possess certain cognitive abilities (or the potential for them) against those who are believed not to actually or potentially possess them (Carlson 2001, 140)” (189).*

Conceptual Oppression: *“the continued misrepresentation of people with cognitive disabilities through the concept of cognitive disability—ability—itself” (189).*

Brief Summary:

§1 Pathologizing the Mind and Marginalizing the Body

“In this section, I show how the ideal of able-mindedness has its roots in racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized ideas about bodily normalcy, beauty, intelligence, and competence, and how these norms continue to regulate bodies of color” (183-184).

Taylor provides a brief summary of the origins of our society’s current conception of disability:

- 19th century “ugly laws”: disability is a social problem in need of a social remedy.
- 20th century eugenics movements: disability is a menace; science is the answer.

- Able-mindedness becomes synonymous with whiteness
- Opposition/resistance to white supremacy becomes “pathological,” “feeble-minded”

§2 Maintaining “Feeble-Mindedness”

“[T]he attribution of irrationality and craziness is often used against those who take an oppositional stance to dominant norms and activities, especially women” (186).

Taylor discusses examples in which attributions of mental disability (in her usage) are used to discredit and marginalize:

- Marilyn Frye calls a black woman scholar “crazy” for demanding that women of color be included in efforts to combat racial privilege.
- Rachel Jeantel (friend of Trayvon Martin, witness in George Zimmerman trial) is represented as mentally disabled (in Taylor’s usage) and therefore unreliable and hostile.

§3 The Complicity of Academic Discourse

“[D]isability as a signifier for lack and grotesqueness has been represented within a variety of academic disciplines, including medicine, sociology, anthropology, education, and philosophy” (188).

“Despite the important work of feminists and feminist theory in challenging oppressive social practices and institutions, including representations of women as weak, inferior, and lacking, many feminist activists and theorists who critique the association of women with mental weakness have failed to challenge the norms of able-mindedness that give rise to such attributions (Lamp and Cleigh 2011). In doing so, they leave unchallenged able-mindedness as a construct and its role in social hierarchies (Lamp and Cleigh 2011, 176).” (189)

§4 Of Madness and Multiplicity: Tropes of Feminist Academic Discourse

Taylor calls out a number of feminist scholars for reinforcing the norms of able-mindedness:

- Angela Harris criticizes essentialist and radically pluralist approaches to race, but describes the instability of these approaches using ableist terms (e.g, “autistic”).
- Harris draws on Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness,” which equates black subjectivity with mental disability (in her usage).
- María Lugones jokingly describes her concept of “world-traveling” as a kind of “schizophrenia”

§5 Disrupting the Discourse of Pathology: A Feminist Disability Studies Project

“[W]e must be continuously vigilant in our theorizing about identity to attend carefully to the privileging of able-mindedness and its association with valued racial identity, and to guard against easy slippage into the discourse of pathology” (194).

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

Article/Essay Title:

Author:

Possible Applications:

- Bioethics
- Philosophy of Race
- Feminist Philosophy
- Philosophy of mind
- Philosophy of disability
- Science studies/history of philosophy of science

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- Dialogues in disability blog series
http://philosophycommons.typepad.com/disability_and_disadvanta/
- Dorothy Roberts' work, including
http://diversifyingsyllabi.weebly.com/uploads/3/8/1/8/38180217/diversifying_syllabi_handout_roberts.pdf
- Passages from Foucault lectures Abnormal
- Passage from The Second Sex
- Lydia Brown's blog <http://www.autistichoya.com/>
- Posts on ableist language from Everyday Feminism
<http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/11/ableist-language-matters/>
<http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/08/alternatives-to-oppressive-language/>

Possible Class Activities:

- Discuss how to respond to accusations that social justice movements (or other groups) are full of "hysterics" or "crazy people" without reinforcing ableism
- Get students to reflect on everyday usage of ableist language; have them note for a few days whenever they use it, or when those around them use it, and report on it in class
- Come up with a list of alternative phrases or terms to use