

Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity. By Simi Linton. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media. Edited by Ann Pointon with Chris Davies. London: British Film Institute, 1997.

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Given the fact that almost everyone will become either temporarily or permanently disabled at some point in life, it is surprising that, until recently, disability has been of little theoretical interest to scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Instead, the study of disability has typically been relegated to applied fields such as health care, special education, and rehabilitation. Unlike the medicalized, particularistic approaches of the applied disciplines, Disability Studies is an emergent, interdisciplinary field that conceives of the disabled body as the product of broad aesthetic, political, and historical forces. Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity by Simi Linton, and Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media, edited by Ann Pointon with Chris Davies, contribute to the conversation about disability emerging from the intersection of humanities, social sciences, and applied fields. These works are inspired by the new possibilities for expanding the understanding of disability, as well as frustration that increasing scholarly interest has not yet brought with it any noticeable changes in the configurations of the academic disciplines, curricula, or popular representations.

Simi Linton's Claiming Disability is a clearly articulated, powerful argument for a more comprehensive incorporation of Disability Studies across the curriculum. Linton aims, in part, to elaborate the inadequacies of current social categories, disciplinary formations, and vocabularies for an enlightened understanding of disability. An early chapter entitled "Reassigning Meaning" explores how linguistic conventions produce

social meaning. Even the apparently slight difference between “people with disabilities” and “disabled people,” Linton explains, can distinguish between “maintaining disability as a secondary characteristic,” and making “disabled...a marker of the identity that the individual and group wish to highlight and call attention to.”¹ Linton adopts a historically and culturally comparative approach to unsettle dominant narratives about disability, which have privileged Europe and America at the expense of other national perspectives, ignored variants such as race and gender among disabled populations, and neglected to incorporate the voices of the disabled themselves. Later chapters focus more exclusively on current educational practices in the U.S. Within primary and secondary education, Linton criticizes both the process of “mainstreaming,” where the least disabled children are assimilated into non-disabled classrooms, and Special Education, which segregates non-disabled students from their disabled peers. Likewise, college curricula have relegated disability to the medical or applied fields. Despite a firm commitment to multiculturalism, social sciences and humanities have excluded disability from reconfigurations of canon and curricula. Arguing that Disability Studies shares much in common with and has a good deal to contribute to multiculturalism, Linton writes, “whichever shape these new domains take, it is an affront that disability studies is dismissed out of hand.”²

The anger evident in Linton’s criticism of current disciplinary and social formations is balanced by her pragmatic account of how and why it is crucial to incorporate disability more effectively into the university. Current college curricula reinforce negative attitudes towards disability by banishing it to the helping professions.

¹ Linton 13.

² Linton 92.

This omission may be redressed by bringing disability issues into the liberal arts to develop “a broad-based epistemology of inclusion.”³ Claiming Disability ends with a section called “Applications” that vividly illustrates the potential conflicts that may arise around issues of disability in a number of professions, the inadequate training that students in those fields now receive, and how their understanding might be expanded by a more comprehensive inclusion of Disability Studies into college curricula.

Linton remains ambivalent, however, about the role that the non-disabled are to take in this reconfiguration. Her study vacillates between a demand that we all must recognize the broad-ranging importance of Disability Studies, and a rhetoric of insiders and outsiders, which asserts the impossibility of understanding the experiences of the disabled. “Disability studies theorists” have been reluctant to discuss the pain and limitations that may accompany “the issue of impairment itself,” a matter which “we talk about...among ourselves,” but may be more difficult for “outside critics” to comprehend.⁴ Disability Studies is still a field that, as Linton rightly acknowledges, desperately needs the contributions of disabled persons who have too long experienced discrimination and social marginality; nonetheless, it will also be important to get beyond the focus on “Identity” announced in the title of this study to gain the incorporation into the disciplines that characterizes more established fields such as gender or ethnic studies.

While Claiming Disability often extends beyond issues of identity to a broad-based critique of institutional formations and their impact on many aspects of life in the U.S., few of the essays in Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media are able to make this leap. This collection contains a large number of essays, and one of the problems of

³ Linton 81.

⁴ Linton 138.

navigating it is that there are too many short pieces, many of them by the same authors. The least interesting essays in Framed are concentrated in the first two sections on the representation of disability in cinema and television. There are a few exceptions, such as interviews with the writer and producer of Four Weddings and a Funeral and a reprinted selection from Jenny Morris's Pride against Prejudice; however, too many of these pieces consist of thinly-footnoted, simplistic isolations of good and bad portrayals, with little acknowledgement of the nuanced theories of representation and audience reception that have been applied to the study of popular culture. These pieces will be of little interest to a scholarly audience, particularly those familiar with recent work in film theory. In addition, many of the essays on television focus on British shows unfamiliar to a reader from outside the United Kingdom.

What is most valuable about this collection is that, in keeping with Linton's call for better representation, it incorporates the voices of many disabled persons working as actors, producers, directors, and activists. These essays represent a diverse, and frequently contradictory, array of perspectives that are attentive to the intersection of disability with issues of race, class, and gender. In a culture where it is difficult for disabled persons to find any kind of employment, these authors offer valuable perspectives on the particular difficulties in gaining entrance into media-oriented careers. On a more positive note, they also describe programs that have opened up opportunities for disabled persons to take an active role in planning, production, and distribution of media. As a result, the essays in the latter half of Framed make a more significant and fresh contribution than much of the material in the first two sections. As with Claiming Disability, almost all of the contributors to this collection are themselves disabled, a point

made by biographical statements at the top of each essay. The importance of claiming disability by and for those who identify as disabled is made abundantly clear by the end of these two volumes; whether this interdisciplinary field will successfully move beyond the limitations of a discourse of identity has yet to be determined.

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Signs

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Dear Editors,

Enclosed are three copies of my review of Simi Linton's Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity and Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media, edited by Ann Pointon with Chris Davies. I have also included my review on disk.

I hope you will find it ready for inclusion in the next issue of Signs. Please let me know if you need me to make any changes.

Sincerely,

Rachel Adams,
Assistant Professor, English and Comparative Literature