

**Book Review: Jay T. Dolmage (2017). *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. ISBN: 978-0472053711**

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In *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*, Jay Timothy Dolmage analyzes the ways in which higher education institutions produce, promote, and recreate hierarchies between abled and disabled bodies. As both a graduate of and a professor in higher education himself, Dolmage's critique comes from within the "ivory towers" themselves. This is not to say that Dolmage's *Academic Ableism* doesn't critically engage with the ethics of higher education in an interesting way; however, the book's focus is mainly a critique of higher education and its promotion of ableism and is less concerned with offering alternatives to the normative systems of power in general and ways these can be resisted. He critiques higher education as fundamentally wrapped up in elitist, discriminatory, and eugenic practices, that mask themselves in ideals of intelligence, socialization, and communication. Dolmage uses metaphorical and literal analysis of architecture in university settings to examine these practices and highlight the underlying ethics of higher education.

In order to understand the ways that higher education and universities legitimate and reinforce inequalities for disabled bodies, Dolmage (2017) positions his research within disability and rhetoric studies. Dolmage acknowledges the "emergence" (p. 5) of disability studies in academia as taking a critical approach to disability, understanding its origin as a socially constructed identity as opposed to a medical, genetic disorder. Dolmage states:

Disability studies critiques representations of disability as pathology, as something needing to be cured or killed or educated, as needing to be overcome or compensated for, or a signal from above, as isolating, a symptom of abuse of nature, as existing on a continuum in which one disability is always accompanied by other disabilities, or, conversely in which some disability is clearly better than others. (p. 5)

These perceptions of disability promote the differential treatment of disabled bodies in society and education and is what Dolmage refers to as the logic of “disablism” (p. 6). Disablism uses negatively constructed assumptions about disability to justify this differential treatment. On the other hand, Dolmage introduces “ableism”, which, “instead of situating disability as bad and focusing on that stigma, positively values able-bodiedness,” he continues to assert, “In fact,” he writes, “ableism makes able-bodiedness and able-mindedness compulsory,” (p. 7). In understanding able-bodiedness and able-mindedness as the norm, one positions disability as abnormal; therefore, Dolmage acknowledges how ableism can never be fully removed from disablism. Furthermore, he highlights how in valuing able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, higher education promotes ableism.

Using this logic, Dolmage exposes the paradoxical relationship between disability studies and higher education. Whereas disability studies has “emerged” into different programs, studies, theories, departments in higher education, it has emerged from an institution that not only positively values able-bodied/mindedness, but negatively conceives of and discriminates against disabled bodies:

Even if disability studies has emerged in academia, it has emerged only partially from within an architecture in which ableism has an incredibly powerful hold. In discussing this emergence, it is essential to understand that disability studies has emerged into

higher education, the location so powerfully responsible for the suppression of disabled people. (p. 6).

Dolmage's acknowledgement of disability studies as both emerging from and still submerged within higher education is central to his analysis of higher education as preserving ableist ideologies. In examining this paradoxical relationship, Dolmage uses rhetorical studies. Dolmage states, "rhetoricians recognize the ways that words and language and meaning-making systems shape beliefs, values, institutions, and even bodies," (p. 7). In connecting rhetorical and disability studies, Dolmage is attempting to expose a deeply ingrained relationship between assumptions of disability and the formation of higher education. His research in *Academic Ableism* is foregrounded on his belief that, "If rhetoric is the circulation of discourse through the body, then spaces and institutions cannot be disconnected from the bodies within them, the bodies they selectively exclude, and the bodies that actively intervene to reshape them," (p. 9). Dolmage analyzes the spaces in university settings that exclude disabled bodies literally and figuratively to highlight the ethics of higher education.

Before discussing the architecture and spatial politics of university campuses, I think it is necessary to bring in additional information about disability studies pertaining to the body. Although Dolmage carefully distinguishes between the emerging forms of disability as partially socially negotiated, Dolmage's argument could be strengthened by considering more specifically the body as a socially constructed entity. In *Educating Unruly Bodies*, for example Nirmala Erevelles (2000) examines disability studies from a materialist standpoint and acknowledges the oppressive social and economic conditions that marginalize bodies labeled with disabilities. She discusses the specific shift in disability studies in analyzing "the material body", stating, "this shift has in fact paralleled

a similar shift in poststructural theory, in which the body is no longer treated as an ahistorical, precultural, or natural object, but is instead conceived of as “the site on which meanings of identity, difference, desire, knowledge, social worth, and possibility are assimilated and contested,” (p. 33). This shift that Erevelles explicitly points out reverberated into the emergence of disability studies that Dolmage examines throughout *Academic Ableism*. It is necessary to understand the post-structural shift in recognizing the body as a transgressive entity because Dolmage bases his analysis on the material body and the spaces that include and more importantly, exclude them.

To examine the ways that spaces in higher education exclude material bodies, Dolmage analyzes campus architecture. *Academic Ableism* begins with the examples of “steep steps”, “ivory towers”, and “large entrance gates” that are, “the stylistic and aesthetic center of many campuses,” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 2). Dolmage uses these spaces as metaphors that represent the foundational ableist ethics of higher education. Arguably Dolmage’s favorite metaphor, the one he begins the book with and uses as a thread to understand normative practices in higher education, are the steep steps. To discuss the steep steps, Dolmage states, “The steep steps metaphor puts forward the idea that access to the university is a movement upwards-- only the truly fit survive the climb ... The steps work well to teach students to look down upon those on the steps below them while they carefully maintain their own positions,” (pp. 45-46). Dolmage is making the point that these steps not only disable some bodies from entering buildings, but they represent how higher education is constructed as a place only for the very able. The steep steps encompass the university environment that requires not only ability, but proficiency and mastery. “The self or selves,” Dolmage writes, “that have been projected upon the space of the university are not just able-bodied and normal, but exceptional, elite” (p. 45). By portraying university students as exceptional and elite, society has created a standard to look up to

and to model. These standards within higher education create norms in society regarding notions of intelligence, socialization, and communicative exchange. Dolmage argues that higher education preserves those normative standards, and he maps the history of these norms beginning with the eugenics movement.

Dolmage introduces a diagram of feeble-mindedness created by the American Philosophical Society in 1906 called, “Exhibit of Work and Educational Campaign for Juvenile Mental Defectives.” (p. 64). The diagram is based off the Binet test that classified individuals into mental age groups based on their answers to the standardized questions. The diagram is a set of stairs, each stair denoting a different mental age, with the bottom stair being the lowest mental age and the top stair being the highest mental age. Additionally, the steps link the mental age of the individuals to forms of work, creating a connection between one’s mental age and one’s labor-output; furthermore, associating one’s mental age with one’s value to society. He asserts, “If these steps in the image on the next page represent the very bottom of the steep steps we climb to the ivory tower, they nonetheless cannot be disconnected from the history of the North American higher education,” (p. 63). Dolmage uses this diagram to link the eugenics movement and higher education through his steep stairs metaphor; he suggests this diagram is the beginning of the steep steps that bodies have to climb in order to make it to higher education. This diagram links notions of intelligence to mental age, creating a norm between individuals’ development and their intelligence and/or sociability. Furthermore, as Dolmage asserts, the diagram links one’s value to society to their labor output, whereas individuals with lower mental ages were presumed less valuable to society and vice versa.

Ashley Taylor’s “Knowledge Citizens? Intellectual Disability and the Production of Social Meanings Within Educational Research” examines the previously stated relationship between one’s presumed mental ability and their

value to society. Taylor analyzes the ways that presumed intellectual and cognitive impairment appears as a barrier between individuals and their ability to be of value to society. Taylor (2018) states, “the pervasive view of citizenship and civic membership presumes a connection between particular developmental capacities considered attributes of adults (independence, verbal ability, “mature” behavior) and the ability to participate in civic activities,” (p. 12). This linkage between mental development and presumed civic ability can be traced back to eugenic practices, as pointed out by Dolmage. Although Dolmage acknowledges this relationship, he does not explore it.

*Academic Ableism* examines specifically the higher education system and how it isolates and silences bodies labeled with disabilities through the maintenance of societal norms regarding intelligence, communication, and sociability. His critique should have gone into detail about bodies who are presumed to have specifically cognitive and intellectual impairments where they do not express themselves in normative ways, as these are the bodies which are most actively isolated and silenced from university settings. Of course, Dolmage mentions these bodies, only to ironically state how they are silenced and kept out of higher education spaces. Yet he never goes into detail about non-normative expressions of communication, intelligence, and socialization and how they should be included in formations of knowledge and other epistemic practices. This is an unfortunate omission that can be seen in Taylor’s (2018) assertion that “normalized expectations of ability impose counter-productive learning goals for some children, and these actually impede their learning and educational progress. Autistic advocate Jamie Burke describes how his teachers, in perceiving him through the lens of intellectual disability, spent hours teaching him to learn to tie his shoes while failing to provide alternative means of communication, something that would have enhanced his learning tremendously,” (p. 10). In valuing normative forms of development and

communicative processes, Burke represents a large number of students labeled with disabilities who because they did not develop according rigid parameters in some areas, and are therefore assumed to be incompetent in others. This rides on the assumption that, “incompetence in one area (defined in terms of independence) is globalized to indicate incompetence in another area,” according to Taylor (p. 11). Furthermore, Burke’s story highlights the ways in which the education system disables bodies by defining strict terms of success without adequate alternatives for students whose forms of knowledge, socialization, and communication are outside spheres of normal development.

To shift back to Dolmage, I will next turn to the ways that higher education and society address disability. Although higher education is seen as this pillar of elitism, as Dolmage (2017) explains, the presence of disability in higher education should come as no surprise. As he has reiterated throughout *Academic Ableism*, “There is no normal body or mind,” (p. 62). However, Dolmage points out that even the presence of disabilities within higher education alludes to the greater discriminatory and normative practices of higher education.

Universities, in part because of mandated laws, have created disability offices and accommodation services for their disabled students. Dolmage urges us to view accommodations as “after-thoughts,” as “their presence should not make us feel satisfied; they should call up the repeated, layered, nearly overwhelming presence of exclusive structures” (p. 79). This is especially evident in higher education, where although disability is recognized, it is only recognized through proper documentation. Furthermore, even if disability is properly documented through disability services, “the accommodations offered still demand that the student must accommodate him or herself to the dominant logic of classroom pedagogy,” (p. 80). Therefore, although disability has entered in the steep steps of academia, the normative ethics of higher education force assimilation through accommodation. While accommodations allow for students to find

different avenues to achieve standards in higher education, they do not change the norms of intelligence, socialization, and communication.

Like I previously stated, Dolmage urges us to understand accommodation as an afterthought, as a bandaid that offers a temporary solution. Dolmage analyzes accommodations in this way in order to reveal the “inherent inaccessibility” of both higher education and society at large. Accommodations, which Dolmage uses interchangeably with the term retrofits, are all throughout society.

Wheelchair ramps, closed captioning, and assistive touch - to name a few - are all retrofits that Dolmage introduces as having made life easier and more accessible for more than those it was initially intended for. This isn't always the case however, sometimes these accommodations are deeply complicated and inconvenient. Dolmage uses the example of a wheelchair ramp for a set of steps at a young girl's home who uses a wheelchair; the ramp zig zags back and forth in a nauseating maze-like fashion that was more inconvenient, complex, and time consuming than the original set of stairs (and was also extremely costly and aesthetically displeasing). This wheelchair ramp and other defeat devices, which are created with the goal of making something more accessible, preserve exclusion and division by offering “solutions” that in reality delay access. These defeat devices and other accommodations show the inherently unequal design of many structures around us; and furthermore, Dolmage asserts that the continued decision to create accommodations to structures that knowingly disable some bodies rather than create new inclusive structures exposes society's overall tendency to maintain structures that privilege the norm over the other.

Dolmage concludes *Academic Ableism* by analyzing the emancipatory capacity of popular films through the theme of failure. Dolmage brings in Jack Halberstam to articulate his understanding of failure, “while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects... it also provides the



opportunity to critique the belief that success happens to good people and failures is just a consequence of bad attitude rather than structural conditions” (p. 173). Dolmage analyzes popular films and how their failures, “made space for other ways of knowing and learning” (p. 173). Although Dolmage defines and highlights the emancipatory capacities of failure as an alternative to the normative structures of power in society, his conclusion leaves the reader bereft of potential solutions.

For example, ableism could be combatted by turning to stupidity as an alternative way of knowing. Similar to failure, Ford and Sasaki (in press) define stupidity as, “that which can’t be articulated, commanded, or absorbed by capital” (p. 2). They describe stupidity as “a state of being beyond measurement, one that totally resists all attempts at measurement by finance and empire. By claiming the power of stupidity and encouraging experiences in stupor, we can work to produce forms of subjectivity that are antagonistic to the neoliberal regime.” (p. 6). Stupidity is an alternative to neoliberalism as it cannot be measured or quantified. Stupidity provides opportunities for new ways of thinking and being in the world as it is removed from any and all exchanges of usability. Stupidity is emancipatory specifically for disabled bodies because in its removal from any and all use and exchange values, stupidity is removed from defined norms of intelligibility and communication.

As Dolmage reiterates throughout *Academic Ableism*, the structure of the university by upholding standards of ableism and normativity, excludes against the disabled body. Because of these ethics, the university is wrapped up in economic gain and measured ability. By possessing the “incapacity to actualize and articulate,” (Ford and Sasaki, in press, p. 8) stupidity is a form of knowledge and meaning-making that pervades society and specifically the neoliberal university.

Jay Timothy Dolmage's critique of higher education in *Academic Ableism* offers his readers with a metaphorical analysis of spaces in universities, the bodies within them, and the bodies they selectively exclude. He underlies the foundations of higher education as based in eugenic practices and preservation of norms in society regarding notions of intelligence, socialization, and communication. Even though Dolmage's critique emerges from within higher education itself, he still critically analyzes the ways in which it systematically segregates against disabled bodies. My main critique of his analysis was that it provides very little emancipatory practices for disabled bodies to create alternatives to the norms of higher education and society at large. Relatedly, his research and analysis of higher education highlights the exclusiveness of many aspects of our society, not just higher education.

### References

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