Portfolio Exam

Due by 9:00AM on August 13, 2018 emailed as one continuous PDF (including cover sheet) to nsilverman@gc.cuny.edu. Exams received after 9:00AM on August 13 and/or not sent as one continuous PDF will receive a grade of Fail.

Student Number:

This exam includes:

Framing Essay (2000 words total)

Including:
Intellectual Autobiography (1000 words)
Reflections on the Portfolio Exam (1000 words)

Conference Paper (10 double spaced pages + works cited)

Including:
Conference Call for Papers
Abstract (200 words)

Plus two of the following three parts:

Review Essay (12-15 double spaced pages)

Annotated Bibliography

Including:
15 Entries
1500 word Rationale

Syllabus (5-8 double spaced pages in total)
including:
Teaching Statement (1-2 pages)
Syllabus (3-4 pages)
Analytical Explanation (2-3 pages)

This exam fulfills the comprehensive stipulations in the following ways (texts may be repeated):

1. Three different centuries:
   a. Text: Part:
   b. Text: Part:
   c. Text: Part:
2. One Pre-1800 text & One Post-1800 text:
   a. Text: Part:
   b. Text: Part:
3. Two different national traditions:
   a. Text: Part:
   b. Text: Part:

Intellectual Autobiography

My major area of interest is nineteenth-century British novels that include depictions of disability. I want to re-examine the disabled characters in novels, many of which have been largely under-analyzed and under-researched, from the perspective of literary disability studies. I am especially interested in these novels for their commentary on the relationships between disability and caregiving, pity, sympathy, domesticity, marriageability, fertility, parenthood, and (de)sexualiziation. I want to use these works to explore the ways in which Victorian novels reflected and occasionally critiqued the dominant societal views about disability, in particular the intersections of disability, gender, and sexuality. Because Gothic/sensation novels are often the most subversive, I am interested in how authors in that genre challenged prevailing ideas about disability, especially when compared to novels and authors within the realist canon.

Though I am interested in exploring the intersections of disability, gender, and sexuality generally, my specific interest is in blindness/ocularcentrism and femininity. I would like to explore the way blindness was gendered in the nineteenth century, how blindness affected the expression of gender and sexuality, and how blindness impacted marriageability. The central concepts of my research interest revolve around typhlology (the study of blindness) and include the fondness for, obsession with, attraction to, fetishization of, and fear of blindness. To examine these concepts I want to examine both realist and sensation novels of the long nineteenth century. In particular, I wish to explore Wilkie Collins' *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) and works like it more in depth, discovering the context in which blindness as a disability is feminized in the nineteenth century and how this gendering is represented in literature. In my future research I want to engage with medical humanities theories/techniques to investigate the relationship between medical discourse and literature and how it impacted popular beliefs about blindness. To do this I

plan to research major medical texts as well as medical developments, particularly the development and popularization of cataract surgery, and the ways it impacted both literature and societal ideas about blindness. Methodologically, I will use feminism/gender theory, queer theory, performance studies, and gaze theory to approach my scholarship in intersectional ways.

Taking classes has not necessarily helped me consolidate my interests, but overall this first year of graduate school has helped complicate my understanding of my topic. In particular, my courses have helped me situate my ideas of specific works within the larger context of the nineteenth century, provided context and background about where certain Victorian literary trends may have begun, and gave me new theoretical/critical tools to use in my analysis. A Romanticism class that I took expanded my ideas of the nineteenth century, helping me to question where the Victorians inherited their beliefs and how they challenged the tropes created by their predecessors. For example, in my future research I would like to explore how and when blindness transformed from the Romantic associations (masculine, beggars, visionaries, poets) to the Victorian ones (feminine, daughters, tragic beauties, musicians). My class on the Brontës, Hardy, and Lawrence provided me with a great opportunity to write about disability in new ways, and I produced papers focusing on trauma as disability in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Tess of the d'Ubervilles* and crippled sexuality in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

Taking classes in the Theater department has also been rather relevant, providing me with more background in performance studies and theory, something I want to use in my own research of literature, particularly the performativity of gender, sexuality, and disability. In the Fall, I took on a disability-focused course that examined Young Adult Fiction, a genre I had never worked in before. I found it both challenging and productive to write about a familiar subject but in a type of literature completely foreign to me. Being a research assistant for the

professor who taught this course (Carrie Hintz) was also an important scholarly experience for me, since I learned a great deal about a new field, Children's Literature, but also used my background in disability studies to help with her current book project.

Most of all, the Somatic Austen course I took expanded my ideas about disability and potentially provided me with a new angle for my research topic or maybe even an orals list (on the professionalization of the medical practice). I have always wanted medical humanities and the history of medicine to be a part of my focus, but I had only been thinking about this in terms of my blindness topic, specifically looking at medical treatises about typology/ophthalmology and cataract surgery. However, after reading *The Birth of the Clinic* on my own and writing about the rise of medical authority in Austen's novels, I have become fascinated with the topic and the ways in which it could potentially work itself into my focus on blindness. For example, in *Poor Miss Finch,* Lucilla consults two doctors about cataract surgery, only believing the German Dr. Grosse who claims he can cure her; for the rest of the novel he has an oddly paternal relationship to her and she completely trusts his authority. In my previous work on the novel I did not explore that relationship, but in light of works I have recently read and papers I have written, I would love to analyze how medical authority and legitimacy plays into the world of this novel and to my larger research topic as a whole.

Next semester I am taking Consortium and Futures Initiative classes on Sensation/Aesthetic Fiction, and Disability Society and Culture—the two major sides of my academic focus. In the Spring, I will take courses Caroline Reitz (Dickens) and Lyn Di Iorio (the Gothic) and ideally take a medical humanities-based class (either in Narrative Medicine at Columbia or with Monica Calabritto in Comparative Literature). In addition to teaching my goal for next year is to present at conferences and to start adapting some of my work into articles.

Reflections on the Portfolio Exam

I have used this exam thematically to explore disability in various ways, in several centuries, in primary and secondary sources, in various media, and in British and American texts. Because blindness in the nineteenth century is my current specialized field of research I used the exam to broaden my knowledge of blindness *outside* nineteenth century, of *other disabilities*, of disability in *other media,* and of *disability studies/theory* in general.

My annotated bibliography accomplishes the first task, exploring primary and secondary sources about blindness from approximately 1650 to 1920, which helped to complicate my understanding of the disability by exploring it outside my usual historical period. In addition, I focused more on masculinity for this bibliography, in direct contrast to my previous research on blind women. This shift in focus helped round out my understanding of my topic and provide points of comparison. Most explicitly, I used this section of the exam to explore the longue durée of my research topic, examining the context before and after my specific period of interest. This assignment also challenged me to engage with types of texts I do not usually work with (poetry, plays, letters, medical textbooks, and philosophy essays) and new methodological approaches within the secondary scholarship. In particular this part of the exam was also productive for my future research here at the Graduate Center. The annotated bibliography helped me work through a potential first chapter of my dissertation, or maybe even part of a reading list for orals.

My conference paper tackles many of my tasks since it focuses on social anxiety in 21st century America, depicted in a musical, *Dear Evan Hansen.* The conference paper helped me explore my interest in disability as an identity category but also allowed me to examine something other than blindness. It also pushed my outside of my Victorian comfort zone and outside the familiarity of the novel. I was very happy to accept this challenge and apply all that I

learned in my many Theater classes, utilizing theories about musical theater, performativity, paratext/performance, and dramaturgy. I presented the paper at the ESA graduate conference and it was my first time ever presenting. It was an incredibly valuable experience and I received some enthusiastic praise and feedback. Ideally, I will have a section of my dissertation that explores depictions of blindness on the Victorian melodrama stage, so writing about disability in performance here was important groundwork for my future scholarly endeavors, since disability in performance is a completely different world than disability in literature.

Lastly, my syllabus applies disability studies to the standard curriculum offering of a focused literary theory seminar. This course drew on all the disability theory I have read on my own and organized it into a scaffolded and structured syllabus that helps provide students with an overview of the field. In many ways, I designed a course I wish I could have taken during undergrad, since most of my disability work was completed independently or in independent studies with a faculty mentor. I also used my knowledge of the field to combine accessible pedagogy with engagement of works of writing on/about disability. Although I used *Jane Eyre* as a basis for the course, “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are equally important primary texts, both of which are not within my standard area of expertise. In particular, I included *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a challenge to myself to examine the legacy of the Victorians, to look beyond and outside of nineteenth century Britain, to think about the period in more comprehensive, conceptual, global, and intersectional ways.

In a desire to craft a First Year Portfolio that was thematically unified but still comprehensive, I found many unexpected connections. My bibliography spans four centuries, my syllabus literally travels across the Atlantic Ocean, and my conference paper traverses from text to paratext, from page to stage; my portfolio covers four hundred years, three countries, and

eight genres. As someone who usually focuses on British novels written within a hundred years, this exam pushed my limits as a scholar in regards to country, period, and genre. But it was quite fruitful: I found many connections among the texts I used, such as in the representation of disability in *Frankenstein, Dear Evan Hansen,* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*—all of which question and challenge assumptions about what you see and how we read people's bodies.

In several ways, this first year and this exam pushed me outside my comfort zone. I took classes in genres I had never dealt with on a scholarly level (children's/young adult novels, musical theater, contemporary performance art), worked on periods I had previously not explored (seventeenth, eighteenth, early twentieth, and twenty first centuries), and focused on non-British literature (American and Canadian) for the first time ever. I tried to use the exam to continue pushing my boundaries by incorporating these diverse genres, types of media, authors, periods, methodological approaches, and non-British texts. In addition, the very assignments of the exam pushed and challenged me, since I had never written a paper designed for a conference and had never written a syllabus. Creating a syllabus was probably the most difficult element, since it challenged me to not only chose a particular theme and specific works, but also made me think pedagogically about my class procedures, assignments, and grading criteria, something I had never done before. The syllabus did give me a great opportunity to implement the accessible pedagogy practices about which I have become so passionate. For these reasons, I found the exam to be productive since it forced me to write in academic genres which are important for my career, allowed me to narrow of area of focus, as well as encouraged me to explore my interest in a broader, categorical way with texts outside of my standard time period and national tradition.

The Blindman in British Literature from Milton to Modernism

The following set of annotations has two functions: first, it provides an overview of current literary scholarship on blindness, and second, explores depictions of blind men in texts across four centuries. I am gearing up for a dissertation on blindness and gender in the Victorian novel, but I felt it was essential to explicitly explore blindness outside of the Victorian period. Because my ultimate work will center on women, I decided to focus on blind men here. Both the gender and temporal focus of this bibliography are outside my area but help me establish a meta-narrative. The context explored in this bibliography may appear in my dissertation, probably in an introduction or first chapter that provides background on the literary and cultural legacy of blindness that the Victorians inherited. I could potentially use many of these sources again if I end up having an orals list on depictions/theories of blindness. Either way, preparing this bibliography was certainly productive for my future research, since working on these non-Victorian texts altered and deepened my understanding of the history of blindness. As an academic, I also recognize the importance of working outside your period, so this bibliography forced me to learn about a historical trend in periods I do not work in.

Blindness has mostly been studied in a way that enforces periodization, but I am interested (in both this bibliography and in my larger research project) in looking at blindness in a way that questions historical periods. For example, attitudes about blindness did not change when Queen Victoria was crowned, although ideas about blindness in the beginning of the nineteenth century are completely different from those later in the century. I want to examine when and why these changed, not based on the lines of a historical period, but as a cultural phenomenon. In creating this bibliography, I feel like I have defined a useful scholarly genealogy that aims at tracing major cultural shifts in the history of blindness.

Before I started research on this annotated bibliography I had preconceived ideas about how blindness was treated in literature. For example, I had embraced Milton as an iconic figure but had not examined his writings on blindness closely or explored how he achieved his status as the blind bard. I had similarly simplistic views of the Enlightenment and the Romantic era, the former of which I associated with empiricism and the latter with mysticism. The Enlightenment is usually linked with the scientific method, rational thinking, and the linguistic concept "I see therefore I understand." Alternatively, Romanticism breaks down simple relationships with knowledge, complicating our epistemologies by focusing on the undefinable. Completing this biography revealed to me that both periods had more diverse relationships with blindness than I had previously thought. The Enlightenment in particular had an incredibly nuanced and complicated debate about blindness and vision, while the Romantics depicted blindness in poetry in a great number of ways.

When I entered this project, I had some questions about the gendering of blindness, before, during, and after the Victorian period, since that is one of central topics for my potential dissertation. For example, was blindness seen as male pre-nineteenth century, and if so why? Did this change for the Victorians? Did they characterized blindness as female? What happened to cause this change? Having completed this bibliography, I do not necessarily have answers to these questions, but I do have a much better sense of the intersections between blindness and masculinity across several centuries. Going forward, I am interested in exploring gender more explicitly, analyzing how masculinity plays into important depictions of blindness such as Milton, the Blind Beggar, Ossian, De Lacey, and Rochester.

My bibliography is comprised almost exclusively of secondary texts, but I chose them because of their engagement with primary texts that depict or discuss blindness. The collection of primary texts spans many genres including poetry, novels, (auto)biography, philosophical

treatises, epistolary exchanges, stage plays, short stories, a proto-anthropological/sociological study, and medical textbooks. In several ways, this diverse set of primary texts helped me explore a cultural studies approach. I am very interested in the ways in which fictional depictions of blindness impact public perceptions of blindness, the creation of programs/schools/charities for blind people, and most importantly, the lives of blind people. Thus, by using both fictional and non-fictional sources, I hoped this annotated bibliography could give me a sense of the changing cultural position of blindness from about 1650 to 1920. There is no other work that examines blindness with as much historical breadth as I do in this bibliography.

In addition to engaging with various genres of primary sources, I also wanted to explore a variety of literary approaches within the secondary scholarship: historicist, biographical, phenomenological, philosophical, but also medical humanities and disability studies. In my future research I hope to draw on multiple approaches so I found this to be a helpful exercise. The texts in the bibliography are all secondary but are arranged according to the primary text(s) discussed, moving from Milton to Locke to Wordsworth to Brontë to Kipling, etc. I understand that this is extremely nontraditional. However, my bibliography traces a historical narrative and therefore it makes the most sense to organize it chronologically by the primary texts. By analyzing the sources in this way, the aforementioned scholarly genealogy become apparent, period lines break down, and three major themes emerge: the persona of the blind person, medical advancements, and philosophical debate.

The first of these themes, persona, involves the creation and proliferation of blind celebrities, mostly literary. The most famous of course is Milton, whose writings about his blindness secured his historical place in the blindness canon and established his persona as the blind bard. Milton's omnipresent status and association with blindness can be witnessed in the many times he is invoked within the other primary texts: he appears in places as diverse as the

epigram to *Frankenstein* and the frontispiece to a medical textbook, *Blindness and the Blind.* Macpherson directly drew on the Milton craze and popularity and created a Celtic blind bard, Ossian, "translating" entire collections of "Ossian's" poetry. In less intentional ways, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Brontë all created similar iconic personae, albeit literary ones. Wordsworth's Blind Beggar, Shelley's De Lacey, and Brontë's Rochester have become canonical blind characters in British literature, holding a type of celebrity status.

The second overarching theme is medical advancements. Most obviously, these include to works of surgeons like Jacques Daviel, who perfected the cataract surgery. But other important medical texts, such as Levy's *Blindness and the Blind*, act as historical artifacts in the public interest in medical and scientific approaches to blindness, which eventually legitimized typhlology, the study of blindness. Levy's medical publication on typhlology and cataract surgeries represents a critical moment for studies of blindness: it captures the precise intersections of accessible cataract surgeries and popular fascination with blindness. The result, of course, was an influx not only of charities and schools for blind people, but literary depictions of blindness, particularly characters becoming blind and eventually recovering sight. Novels of this type were created by Brontë and Collins, and works that similarly explore the medicalization of blindness were written by Wells and Synge.

The third and final theme to emerge from the bibliography is philosophical debate about blindness, manifested both in philosophical treatises and fiction that engages with the meaning(s) and function(s) of blindness. The most important debate about blindness is the Molyneux problem, which asked if a man born blind—who could distinguish a sphere from a cube—gained sight, would he be able to differentiate them still? The debate spanned historical periods, and although it began with Locke during the Enlightenment it spurned responses from Diderot during the Romantic Era and Mayhew in the Victorian period. Although not nearly as philosophical in

nature, several people have attempted to find real-life answers to the Molyneux problem. Mayhew, for example, explored blind beggars in a sociological way, often asking them about shape differentiation. The notion of changing states of vision was popular among the Modernists, and authors such as Green, Lawrence, Barclay, Wells, Synge, Conrad, and Kipling created characters who went in and out of states of blindness; *Jane Eyre* also falls into this category, pre-dating the Modernist obsession with altered and changing states. In a more indirect sense authors including Wordsworth, Shelley, and Collins used blind characters to debate the "meanings" of blindness, musing more in a philosophical sense (blindness as metaphor).

Together these sources, both primary and secondary, comment on each other, providing a historical narrative with thematic continuities. Levy builds on Daviel, Diderot on Locke, Macpherson on Milton, Barclay on Brontë. The scholars too build on each other: Wang, Bolt, Holmes, and Larrissy critique the scholars who came before them who did not examine blindness as a disability, instead viewing it only as a metaphor or narrative prosthesis. By itself this bibliography does not necessarily include intense engagement with medical humanities or disability studies, but it does provide me with primary sources, as well as academic discussions of them, that I can use to help produce a chapter for my dissertation. By applying disability theory to this bibliography I believe I could effectively weave these works into my larger project. Most importantly, this bibliography helped me work through some of my central research questions about blindness and gender.

Timeline of Primary Texts

- (**1652-1673**) Sonnets XVI and XIX, "To Mr. Cyriack Skinner upon his Blindness," *Samson Agonistes, Three Defenses,* and *Paradise Lost* by John Milton
- (**1689**) "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" by John Locke
- (**1709**) "An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision" by George Berkeley
- (**1749**) "Letter on the Blind for Use of those who can See" by Denis Diderot
- **(1753)** "A new Method of Curing Cataract by Removing the Lens" by Jacques Daviel
- (**1765**) *The Works of Ossian* by Scott Macpherson
- (**1797-1814**) "The Blind Highland Boy," "…Tintern Abbey," *The Borderers, The Excursion*, and *The Prelude* by William Wordsworth
- (**1818**) *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley
- (**1847**) *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë
- (**1851**) *London Labour and the London Poor* by Thomas Mayhew
- (**1857**) *The Dead Secret* by Wilkie Collins, adapted play by E. M. Bramwell (1877)
- (**1872**) *Blindness and the Blind: A Treatise on the Study of Typhlology* by W. H. Levy
- (**1891-1904**) *The Light that Failed* and "They" by Rudyard Kipling
- (**1903**) *The End of the Tether* by Joseph Conrad
- (**1904**) "Country of the Blind" H. G. Wells
- (**1905**) *The Well of the Saints* by J. M. Synge
- (**1906**) *Sir Nigel* by Arthur Conan Doyle
- (**1909**) *The Rosary* by Florence Barclay
- (**1920**) "The Blind Man" by D. H. Lawrence
- (**1926**) *Blindness* by Henry Green

Barasch, Moshe. "The Renaissance and Its Sequel" and "The Disenchantment of Blindness." Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought. New York: Routledge, 2001. 115-158.

Barasch's text explores blindness as a cultural phenomenon, tracing the historical tropes of blindness and popular associations with the disability. He states that in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance era the most common mental images of blindness were the blind beggar, the blindfold symbolic figure, and the blind seer, all secular images that were antithetical to more religious depictions from the Middle Ages. Barasch argues that all of these mental images treated the disability as a metaphor, not as a real-life lived condition. At this time in history, blindness had to mean something. It could not just exist. Often blindness was related to religious and spiritual visionaries, including Homer and Milton as blind poets and seers. In his final chapter he examines Diderot's letter on the blind, arguing that its secularism and commitment to blindness as a human experience—and not merely a metaphor—was revolutionary. Overall the text's phenomenological approach was very unique, exploring popular tropes of blindness and the way they impacted the collective imagination and interpretation of the disability.

Duran, Angelica. "The Blind Bard, According to John Milton and His Contemporaries." *Mosaic* 46.3 (2013): 141-157.

Duran explores the characterization of Milton as the "blind bard," both by himself in his more autobiographical works, and by scholars writing after his death. In particular Duran focuses on three of Milton's poems, Sonnet XVI: "When I consider how my light is spent," Sonnet XIX: "Methought I saw my late espoused saint," and "To Mr. Cyriack Skinner upon his Blindness." The first of these poems, often referred to as *On His Blindness,* has become accepted as Milton's most definitive and autobiographical statement about his disability. However, Duran argues that it is not only Milton's autobiographical poems we should look at, but his indirect discussions of

blindness in *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. Together, all of Milton's works on blindness characterize the disability as both debilitating and enabling. In particular, the image of Milton as the epic blind poet is a result of *Paradise Lost* in which the speaker discusses blindness and how it has both slowed the writing process and provided a type of visionary experience that made him more creative and spiritually inspired. The source provides helpful close readings and a concise exploration of how and why Milton is regarded as the "blind bard."

Brown, Eleanor Gertrude. "Autobiographical References to His Blindness." Milton's Blindness. New York: Columbia UP, 1934. 51-80.

Brown's work explores both the real-life causes and impact of Milton's blindness as well as the accounts of it he gave indirectly and directly in his writing. Brown not only discusses the Sonnets and Paradise Lost, but also makes an argument that Milton's three Defenses provide important evidence about the nature of Milton's blindness. She uses the historical-biological fact that Milton wrote the Defenses when he was going blind, and immediately after becoming blind, to argue that they are significant in any examination of the relationship between Milton's blindness and his writing. Brown also notes that Milton considered his blindness to be both a strength and weakness, something that did not make him wretched and actually made him closer to God. One of Brown's most controversial claims is that Milton frequently wrote about his blindness because it has emotional appeal and is ripe material for poetry. She does, however, make a significant point about the differences in tone between Sonnet XVI (in which he is depressed), the Second Defense (in which he states that blindness is a not a weakness), and *Paradise Lost* (in which he claims that it aided his poetic creativity).

Paulson, William. "'Suppose a Man Born Blind…'" and "Diderot: Philosophy and the World of the Blind." Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014. 21-71.

Paulson's recent work is considered the most authoritative text on the subject of blindness in the eighteenth century. His chapters on the Molyneux Problem and Diderot provide helpful insight into how empiricism impacted ideas about blindness and how those ideas have lasted until today. Paulson notes that Enlightenment empiricism equated seeing with knowing, creating a relationship that has persisted in the popular imagination, leading to vision often being associated with knowledge and prioritized as the most important mode of learning. Molyneux, Locke, and Berkeley all debated whether a sighted man who could differentiate objects would still be able do so after he regained his vision. Paulson argues that this popular debate reveals Enlightenment philosophy's obsession over vision and relationship to knowledge absorption; he claims that they used blindness as a point of departure because it represent a man without experience or bias, a blank slate. In his chapter on Diderot, Paulson concludes that this later work questions the very basis of the Molyneux question, and instead of answering it, questions why it was asked all. Paulson notes that Diderot dismantles the empiricist prioritization of vision and treats blind people as individuals instead of vague philosophical concepts.

Degenaar, Marjolein. "Molyneux's Problem" and "Philosophical Discussions in the Eighteenth Century." Molyneux's Problem: Three Centuries of Discussion on the Perception of Forms. Dordrecht: Klewer Academic Publication, 1996.

Degenaar's work examines the Molyneux's problem's largest historical impact, tracing its origins in the mid-eighteenth century through to today. In addition to summarizing various debates on the topic (including that of Locke, Berkeley, Condilliac, La Mettrie, and Diderot), Denegaar details the scientific studies that sought to answer the problem. In particular, she notes the early surgeries of William Cheselden in 1728 and Jacques Daviel in 1747; their experiments

were an attempt to provide real-life answers to the Molyneux question. Although neither experiment/surgery was able to answer the question, they did provide significant scientific advancements. In general, Denegaar's work is more descriptive than argumentative, and instead of advancing a thesis simply provides detailed summaries on the changes in the philosophical debate and medical advancements related to the Molyneux question. The most interesting part of the book is the retrospective, which discusses reason they had the debate in the first place and our modern ways of dealing with it, suggesting that although the question can never be definitively answered (because the premise is too simple and does not take into account individual factors), there is no real reason to answer it.

Albert, Daniel M. "Jacques Daviel: The Invention of Modern Cataract Surgery." Foundations of Ophthalmology: Great Insights that Established the Discipline. Eds. Michael F. Marmor and Daniel M. Albert. New York: Springer International Publishing, 2017. 11-22.

Albert's chapter of this medical text provides a historical and biological account of Jacques Daviel, including a brief biography and a technical description of his early cataract surgery. Albert notes that Daviel is an important figure within the historical narrative about cataract surgery, but complicates popular opinion by proving that he neither discovered it nor perfected it. However, he does conclude that Daviel was essential in popularizing the cataract surgery, noting in particular the importance of Daviel's published paper, "A new Method of Curing Cataract by Removing the Lens," and his personal promotion of the surgical practice. Most importantly, Albert notes that Daviel invented a new type of instrument that allowed for a new type of cataract surgery, extracapsular extraction, which he first performed in 1747 (as opposed to the previous couching technique he had been sing since 1733). It was this technical innovation that revolutionized the field of cataract surgery. Overall this is a descriptive work most likely

intended for medical students in order to teach the history of medicine; it is therefore a basic description of facts and is non-argumentative and not thesis-driven.

Larrissy, Edward. "The Celtic Bard in Ireland and Britain: Blindness and Second Sight" and "Wordsworth's Transitions." The Blind and Blindness in the Literature of the Romantic Period. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013. 36-63; 102-140.

Larrissy's work provides an expansive analysis of blindness throughout Romanticism, both literally and figuratively (since blindness was a popular metaphor during the period). Larrissey argues that Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (supposedly authored by the blind poet Ossian), was not unique or original, but was an amalgamation of various Gaelic folk tales about blind artists and travelers. In his chapter on Ossian, he argues that Macpherson co-opted the blind bard figure to evoke a similar sense of disabled visionary poet grandeur that was often associated with Homer and Milton. Larrissy provides a history of the concept of "second-sight" and the Gothic relationship between blindness and futurity, mortality, and spirituality. It is important, he argues, to note the important connections and through-line that can be drawn from Ossian to Wordsworth, since both rely on popular ideas, tropes, and tales about blindness. In his chapter on Wordsworth, he states that blindness show up frequently, not only in *The Prelude*, but in "The Blind Highland Boy," "Tintern Abbey," *The Borderers,* and *The Excursion*. Larrissy's most essential argument here is that while Macpherson may have used blindness to gain popularity, Wordsworth only used it as a metaphor for isolation, alienation, and liminality.

Friedman, Geraldine. "History in the Background of Wordsworth's 'Bind Beggar'." *English Literary History* 56.1 (1989): 125-148.

Friedman's article attempts to place *The Prelude* in historical context, citing the major political (French Revolution) and erotic (relationship with Annette Vallon) circumstances surrounding the

composition and subject matter of the work. She focuses on the figure of the blind beggar from Book VII of *The Prelude*, an enigmatic figure who has been the source of extensive scholarly speculation. Friedman makes numerous claims about the blind beggar, interpreting him—like almost all scholars have—as symbolic and metaphorical. She notes that the blind beggar represents important dichotomies of Book VII, including confusion/clarity, light/dark, crowd/individual, chaos/order, collective/individual, unintelligible/intelligible, undefined/defined, claustrophobic/isolated, in flux/static, background/foreground. She also argues that the figure is an ambiguous political allegory and a rewriting of Milton's Samson. Throughout the article she poses many theories and interpretations of what the blindness may mean, not declaring any as correct or definitive; she even describes the blind beggar as *gestalt*, as undefinable. At no point does Freidman ever consider the literal disability of the blind beggar. She focuses not only on the supposed metaphorical meanings of the blindness, but also on the metaphorical blindness of Wordsworth himself.

Wang, Fusan. "The Historicist Turn of Romantic-Era Disability Studies, or *Frankenstein* in the Dark." *Literature Compass* 14.7 (2017): 14-24.

This recent text tackles the intervention of disability studies on traditional criticism of *Frankenstein* that viewed the disability (the Creature's monstrosity and De Lacey's blindness) as metaphorical. Wang notes that literary scholars have typically stated that De Lacey's blindness is a metaphor for insight, while disability scholars have attacked the novel's exploitation of blindness as narrative prosthesis. In contrast, Wang believes that it is most productive to combine the approaches into a historicist disability studies reading. In combining methods Wang argues that Shelley utilizes and subverts Enlightenment tropes of blindness to create a very nuanced representation of disability. Wang states that the reason this text is so complicated in is depiction

of abnormal embodiment is that the Romantics did not have a clear stance on disability; he claims that Romanticism sits in a transitional moment between Enlightenment empiricism and Victorian sentimentality. Unlike both of those periods, which sought to scientifically define normal from abnormal, the Romantic era was more focused on liminality, which can be seen in the conflicted representations of *Frankenstein*. Wang concludes that scholarship on the text should not reject or praise, but should instead focus on the novel's inherent complications.

Bolt, David. "The Blindman in the Classic: Feminisms, Occularcentrism, and *Jane Eyre*." The Madwoman and the Blindman: *Jane Eyre*, Discourse, Disability. Eds. Julia Miele Rodas, David Bolt, and Elizabeth J. Donaldson. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. 32-50.

In this essay Bolt, probably the most authoritative blindness scholar, compares Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Rudyard Kipling's *The Light that Failed,* two novels that have completely antithetical uses, treatments, and depictions of male blindness. He contends that while blindness is emasculating in *Jane Eyre* and part of the hyper-masculinity of *The Light that Failed*, both novels use blindness to "other" a character, and by extension, to help define the able-bodied, seeing character as a foil. Bolt states that blindness in these novels has three central effects on the characters: alterity, castration, and melancholia, which reveal ableist beliefs about beauty, sexuality, and happiness (respectively). He posits a complex castration that includes both a lack of masculinity and a dangerous haptic sexuality. Although both novels subvert gender roles, they both maintain hierarchies of able-bodied over disabled, normal over abnormal, sighted over blind, enforcing ocularcentrism. Bolt notes that both Rochester and Dick are described as groping and helpless, and it is only when they sighted female companions help them that they are happy. Although the gender subversions in these novels may be surprisingly feminist, Bolt argues that the means by which they are achieved (blinding a male character and making him inferior) are inherently ableist and ocularcentric.

Holmes, Martha Stoddard. "An Object for Compassion, An Enemy to the State: Imagining Disabled Boys and Men." Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2009. 94-123.

Holmes' work is one of the most substantial and varied pieces of scholarship on disability in the Victorian era; in her chapter specifically on masculinity she examines the paradoxical treatment of men and boys as criminals and charity cases (respectively). She argues that disabled men were disliked by society because they existed outside of the domestic sphere and yet were not productive members of society who worked at a trade, produced a product, and made money. Therefore they were considered greedy, lazy, and selfish. In particular, Holmes notes that many disabled men were accused of being imposter beggars, exploiting the charity and compassion the public usually directed towards disabled children. Holmes provides an analysis of Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, focusing on his characterizations of blind beggars. She notes that Mayhew declared blindness as a legitimate cause for both charity and begging while also praising blind men who also sold goods or swept streets. Holmes declares that although Mayhew's treatment of blind men is infantilizing, it is exceptionally sympathetic, since he does not demand or expect them to work like he does other disabled men.

Kucich, John, "Collins and Victorian Masculinity"; Kate Flint, "Disability and Difference"; Jim Davis, "Collins and the Theatre." The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins. Ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 125-138; 143-180.

This anthology provides essays on the life and works of Wilkie Collins. Kucich claims that in his novels Collins associates masculinity with melancholia, a trait that when not narcissistic quickly becomes feminine. This is especially true of his disabled male characters, who are often connected with a more feminine type of melancholia. Flint's piece briefly discusses *The Dead Secret*, Collins' novel with a major male character who is blind. She argues that Collins uses Leonard's blindness as an excuse for Rosamond's gender transgressions. Since he is disabled and

declared incapable, she becomes the detective character. Flint makes the bold claim that the abundance of disabled characters in Collins' *oeuvre* is not because he was obsessed with what makes disabled people different, but rather how similar they are to able-bodied people. She claims that instead of othering his disabled characters, Collins works to show how functional and able they are, thus blurring the line around (dis)ability. Davis writes about Collins relationship with theater and provides accounts of the various novels Collins directly adapted. He does not note the versions that others adapted, like Bramwell's version of *The Dead Secret*. He argues that Collins' innovative novels tragically translated into very conventional stage melodramas.

Levy, William Hanks. Blindness and the Blind: Or, a Treatise on the Science of Typhlology. London: Chapman and Hall, 1872.

In this exhaustive text, Levy, Director of the Society for the Promotion of the General Welfare of the Blind, provides a complete overview, both scientific and cultural, on blindness from antiquity onwards. Some topics covered include the causes of blindness, treatments/surgeries, systems of writing, major charities, systems for reading and writing, famous blind people, important organized societies, blind beggars, as well as the relationships of blindness to class, age, gender, and religion. For the time, Levy's most controversial assertions were that blind people should not be pitied, blindness is not a punishment from God, and that blind people are not incapable of work, thought, desires, and spirituality. He significantly advertises and legitimizes the practice of cataract surgeries, encouraging blind people to see doctors. Levy's own blindness and his prominence among the blind community in the late nineteenth century makes this text incredibly unique and important within the field. The work is closely related to similar works by John Kitto, Lancing Artful and William Hall, other notable blind writer who wrote about blindness.

Linett, Maren. "Blindness and Intimacy." Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2016. 55-84.

In this chapter Linett claims that unlike the Victorians, who only introduced blindness at the end of novels and characterized it as isolating, many Modernists wrote texts that explored the possibility of blindness and intimacy (albeit in ways that romanticize disability). Linett suggests that Wells' "The Country for the Blind" proves the social model: if an entire community is blind, then blindness is not a disability for them. Green's novel *Blindness* encourages the gradual realization that blindness is conducive to intimacy with self and others. Synge's *The Well of the Saints* is not only a defense of blindness as beneficial to imagination and affection, but a critique of beauty as merely visual. Linett reads Barclay's *The Rosary* as a revision of *Jane Eyre*, the central pair of the novel is in love before the husband goes blind, and their intimacy is not visually-based. Instead, it is rooted aurally in the wife's singing. Lastly, she notes that the main character in Lawrence's "The Blind Man" is extremely intimate with the land, his livestock, and his pregnant wife, much more so than his sighted foil. Linett argues that although these texts are ocularcentric, they are rather progressive.

Bolt, David. The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2014.

Bolt's work is mostly theoretical, analyzing and providing new vocabulary for the study of blindness. He does sporadically provide readings on Lawrence, Wells, Synge, Green, Doyle (*Sir Nigel)*, Conrad (*The Tether*), and Kipling ("They"), mostly noting how their faux progressivism is ruined by their blatant ableism and ocularcentrism, making their texts more regressive that progressive. Bolt explores theoretical concepts (some new), such as opthmalcentrism, haptic perception, the unseen gazer, ocularnormativism, panopticism, and symbolic castration. He uses some of these frameworks to counter harmful myths about blindness, such as the popular ideas

about sexual lack and/or sexual excess, heighted other senses, contagiousness, infantilization, and the prioritization of independence over dependence. Overall he seeks to make a teleological argument, constructing a metanarrative of blindness in literature defined by the ocularcentric world's discomfort with blindness. He contends that this metanarrative not only shapes public perceptions about blindness, but impacts the lives of blind people; it is rooted in literature but has significant effects on cultural attitudes and real life experiences.

Professor #81811
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Office:
Office Hours:

ENGL 401
Topics in Literature: Disability Studies
Fall 2017
John Jay College, Room ___
MW 3:15-4:45

Course Description
Although identity politics has become an essential part of literary theory, disability studies has not yet achieved the same permanence as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, nor has disability become a standard part of scholarship, curricula, and classroom discussion. This course seeks to provide students with a background in disability theory and its literary applications so that they can utilize this knowledge in other classes and in their future academic pursuits. Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field that spans not only literature but history, philosophy, sociology, political science, biology, linguistics, and more. In this course, we will read the major works that theorize disability generally as an identity category. First, we will read some foundation pieces that will give us a framework and vocabulary to talk about and theorize disability. Then, we will read works of literary disability studies, focusing on readings of *Jane Eyre* and its adaptations. Finally, students will write papers that will apply disability studies to three genres of writing: personal, theoretical, and literary.

Course Goals
- Students will read the major texts of disability theory and will be able to discuss, critique, and write about them
- Students will learn how to apply disability theory to works of literature
- Students will expand their understanding of concepts like *disability* and *ableism*
- Students will produce papers that explore disability theories, disability in literature, and lived experiences of disability

Required Texts
- Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (2008)
- Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring* (2009)
- Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1996)

All other texts will be available online. Please print texts out whenever possible. The texts are listed in the order we will read them. Students will also be responsible for watching any movie version of *Jane Eyre* as well as reading excerpts of the novel.

CUNY Commons
Our class will have a Commons website, once you are enrolled you can request access to the site. I will post the syllabus as well as the readings on the site. You will post your Discussion Questions here as well.

Accommodation and Accessibility

The Office of Accessibility Services is located in L.66.00 and can be contacted at 212-237-8031. Any accommodations required in/for class must be arranged through Accessibility Services before being discussed with the instructor. However, this course is about disability and therefore I take accessibility very seriously and strive to make this class, the classroom, my pedagogy, and my assignments as accessible as possible. Office hours and meetings are available over Skype or Google Hangouts. If you cannot physically be in class because of your disability, let me know and you can use Skype or Google Hangouts to be digitally present. If the classroom or teaching style is inaccessible to you in any way, or if you are in need of an aid or interpreter or laptop, let me know in person or via email. Participation is graded but is accepted in any form that you feel comfortable with, including digital participation during class. If at any point you are uncomfortable talking to me you can contact a representative from the Office of Accessibility and they will relay your concern to me.

Assignments

- Discussion Questions: once every week, post two discussion questions about the readings on the Commons website
- Assignment #1: 500-word blog post on your personal relationship to disability, which could include a picture, and can be about yourself, a family member, a friend, someone you know, or a depiction of disability that has interested or affect you. This will be posted on the class website. Due September 22nd.
- Assignment #2: 10-minute presentation in class on the assigned theory text and then lead class discussion that day (can only be done on days we are discussing theory). This will be done in partners or small groups. This does not have to take the form of a live oral presentation if you are not comfortable, it could be pre-recorded, a powerpoint, or something else that demonstrates your understanding and engagement with the text.
- Assignment #3: 8-10 page paper applying some of theories we read in class to any adaptation of *Jane Eyre* you want (original work or another novel, short story, poem, film, play, musical, etc.). All students must email me with a proposal that states their chosen adaptation and the topic for their paper by November 24th. On our last day of class everyone will give a 5 minute presentation on their paper. Paper is due December 18th.

Grade Breakdown

15% Discussion Questions
15% Participation / Engagement
10% Assignment #1
20% Assignment #2
40% Assignment #3

Formatting and Submitting Work

All work must be typewritten on standard paper, double-spaced in 12-point Times New Roman font with one-inch margins. Complete MLA citations must be used on all papers, including proper heading, page numbers with last name, citations, and a works cited page. All papers are to

be emailed to me by midnight they day they are due. If you require an extension on a paper please email or speak to me as soon as possible.

Late Work Policy

Work is due on the day indicated whether you are present or not. Assignment #1 not be accepted late; if it is not completed by the time it are due it will be counted as a 0. For every day late Assignment #3 will be dropped half a letter grade. For example, if you hand in your final paper a day late, the highest grade it can receive is an A-. It will not be accepted more than 7 days late, and at that point will be given a 0.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the presentation of someone else's ideas, words, or artistic, scientific, or technical work as one's own creation. Using the ideas or work of another is permissible only when the original author is identified. Paraphrasing and summarizing, as well as direct quotations, require citations to the original source. Plagiarism may be intentional or unintentional. Lack of dishonest intent does not necessarily absolve a student of responsibility for plagiarism. It is the student's responsibility to recognize the difference between statements that are common knowledge (which do not require documentation) and restatements of the ideas of others. Paraphrase, summary, and direct quotation are acceptable forms of restatement, as long as the source is cited. Students who are unsure how and when to provide documentation are advised to consult with their instructors. Any student who is found guilty of plagiarism will receive a 0 on the assignment, and the offense will be documented with the college. A second offense will result in failure of the course and will also be documented with the college.

Course Schedule

8/28 **Definitions**: Class discussion—What is Disability? What is Ableism?

8/30 Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"

9/4 NO CLASS

9/6 **Models**: Siebers, *Disability Theory,* Chapter 1

9/11 **Identity**: Siebers, *Disability Theory,* Chapters 2-3

9/13 **Normalcy**: Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy,* Chapters 1 and 2 (p.23-39)

9/18 **Depiction:** Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy,* Chapter 2 (p.39-49)

9/20 NO CLASS (watch/read about *Jane Eyre* over the weekend)

ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE 9/22

9/25 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* excerpts

9/27 **Othering:** Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies,* Chapter 1

10/2 **Othering:** Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies,* Chapter 2

10/4 **Gothic:** Freud, "The Uncanny"

10/9 NO CLASS

10/11 Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Chapter 10

10/16 **Prosthesis:** Mitchell / Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, Preface and Introduction

10/18 **Prosthesis**: Mitchell / Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, Chapters 1-2

10/23 *The Madwoman and the Blind Man,* Chapter 7 (Mintz)

10/25 **Gaze**: Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, Parts 1-2

10/30 **Gaze**: Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, Part 3

11/1 *The Madwoman and the Blind Man,* Chapter 2 (Bolt)

11/6 **Sex**: Siebers, *Disability Theory,* Chapters 7

11/8 **Sex**: Siebers, *Disability Theory,* Chapters 8

11/13 *The Madwoman and the Blind Man*, Chapter 5 (Gabbard)

11/15 **Queering:** McRuer, *Crip Theory*, Introduction

11/20 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* first half

11/22 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea,* second half

PAPER PROPOSAL DUE 11/24

11/27 Josephs, *Representations of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature,* Chapter 3

11/29 Writing Workshop: avoiding ableist linguistics, writing about disability, applying theory

12/4 *The Madwoman and the Blind Man*, Chapter 1 (Donaldson)

12/6 Presentations on final papers

ASSIGNMENT #3 DUE 12/18

Teaching Statement

This course was designed to fill a potential gap in theoretical analysis for students, focusing on a specific topic in order to help round them out as thinkers, writers, scholars, and individuals. I feel that it is incredibly important to expose students to disability studies since it is an important field of study that explores identity in a way that impacts everyone, but that very few students have engaged with. Although there are many courses on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, there are comparatively few on disability. Disability studies not only offers students a new way to examine literature, but provides them with a vocabulary to talk about bodies, minds, and identities of not only themselves, but others. Theoretically it helps them not only become more understanding and more accepting of all types of bodies and minds but also teaches them to resist stigma, ableism, and stereotyping of disabled people.

The focus of this course is not just on disability, but intersectionality as well, which is an incredibly important part of my pedagogy. The scholarly works explore and theorize disability's intersections with race, gender, class, and sexuality, while the primary texts were chosen to illustrate the various ways these identities can combine with disability. In *Jane Eyre* and "The Yellow Wallpaper" disability is tied to gender and class, while in *Wide Sargasso Sea* disability intersects with race. In additional to intersectionality in the syllabus and design of the course, I think acknowledgement of positionality is important in the classroom, and I would begin the course my explaining my own identity as a white, disabled, non-binary, queer person to the class and would create space for them to mention their own identities as part of any and all of our class discussions. I would allow for personal stories since identity is such an important part of the class, and I expect that students' lived realities, positionalities, and intersectional identities could help illuminate many of the theoretical concepts we will be covering.

As also reflected in the attached syllabus, I am passionate not only about intersectional disability studies, but about accessible pedagogy. Often professors create classroom policies around attendance and participation that are deeply ableist. Frequently professors make no efforts to make their classroom more accessible physically, aurally, orally, visually, or emotionally. The most important part of my teaching philosophy is accessibility in all aspects of teaching: course design, grading, classroom etiquette, discussion style, types of assignments, text selection, reading load, lecture formatting, classroom architecture, and technology. For example, I would avoid commonplace pedagogical techniques such as "around the room," where every student is forced to speak at a specific time, and instead allow various forms of communication, including digitally during class (such as a group chat on a projector where students could silently and digitally submit comments) or afterwards on the class blog. I would also hold public, private, and digital office hours to meet the potential needs of my students. At all times I want them to feel comfortable engaging with me, with classmates, and with the material. Toward the end of the semester, but most likely before students will have begun to write their paper, I scheduled a writing workshop that focuses on teaching students to write about disability in ways that are respectful, use preferred terminology, and avoid ableist idioms. As a disability scholar I believe that it is an important pedagogical exercise not only to teach students *about* disability, but also to help them learn the best ways to *talk* and *write* about it. The key part of my teaching philosophy is accessibility; I feel that as a scholar of a disability studies it my duty to create an accessible, open, and accepting space for students to learn about disability.

Account

The purpose for this course is to provide students with a framework, vocabulary, set of skills, and critical texts to discuss and write about disability, since it is an often neglected topic in curricula. The major course objectives include learning how to write about disability in several formats/genres and how to talk about it in formal and informal settings. Accessibility and intersectionality are also important parts of the course, and are reflected in both the design and the objectives. By introducing students to many types of sources, scholars, and authors, I hope to help them think, write, and discuss disability in ways that are both intersectional and accessible.

This course was inspired by the work of Julia Miele Rodas, David Bolt, and Elizabeth J. Donaldson, editors of *The Madwoman and the Blindman:* Jane Eyre, *Discourse, and Disability.* This is the first anthology to analyze disability in a single work of fiction, and it inspired me to pursue a career as a Victorianist who focuses on disability. I believe that *Jane Eyre* is a great text to teach disability studies: it includes mental and physical disability and questions of sickness and health pervade the narrative. However, I do recognize that it is a lengthy novel, it can be a difficult text for students, and that most of the novel is not relevant for a class on disability; thus, I have selected excerpts of only relevant scenes for the students to read. *Jane Eyre* has had an incredibly wide-reaching influence, and whether or not students are aware of it, they have probably seen something based on the novel. The choice of primary texts is inspired by that legacy, thus we also read “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Wide Sargasso Sea.*

The class is organized in a way to start at a basic introduction of the topic of disability (assuming no prior knowledge or experience with the field) and gradually get more in-depth and applied. On the first class we will all work together to try to assemble what disability means. The next class we will see how our tentative definition(s) can be applied “The Yellow Wallpaper”

and horror films with "insane" women villains. We will begin our journey into disability theory by reading Siebers in order to get a basic framework, familiarize ourselves with the subject, and establish a common vocabulary. Next, I will introduce *Jane Eyre*, but in an accessible form that focuses on the material the students need; this will be achieved by having students watch any film adaptation they chose into addition to reading summaries and excerpts from the novel provided by me. Afterwards we will spend time with some literary disability studies (Davis, Mitchell and Snyder, and Garland-Thomson), applying the more general ideas we learned about disability to fiction as a whole. We first read general disability theory, then literary disability theory, and then we move on to scholarly articles that actually apply these theories to *Jane Eyre*, all taken from *The Madwoman in the Attic* and *The Madwoman and the Blindman.* Next we will move on to more advanced and intersectional disability theories by McRuer, Siebers, and Garland-Thomson that combine disability with gender, queerness, class, and race. Then we will read *Wide Sargasso Sea* and some intersectional scholarly pieces that discuss how disability operates in that novel compared to *Jane Eyre*. Overall the class goes from general to specific, vocabulary to literary analysis, theory to close readings, mono-focused to intersectional.

On October 23rd, halfway through the course, we will read Susannah B. Mintz's chapter in *The Madwoman and the Blindman,* "Illness, Disability, and Recognition in *Jane Eyre*," which posits the many ways not only disability, but ill-health permeate the novel, from Jane's parents, to Helen Burns, to Aunt Reed, to Bertha Mason, to Mr. Rochester. This reading comes at a crucial midpoint in the semester and in some ways is the axis on which the course begins to turn, moving from reading more general theory to reading works of applied criticism. This piece is the first time students are introduced to a scholar applying the disability theories they have read to *Jane Eyre*. Structurally, the article's focus on psychoanalytic "recognition" also provides ground

work our next work of theory, Garland-Thomson's *Staring.* Mintz's arguments draw directly on (and cites) the works of Siebers, Mitchell and Snyder, and Lennard Davis, and includes close readings of scenes of illness from *Jane Eyre* that we will have read as a class in the excerpts.

I find this chapter to be a perfect introduction of applying disability theory to students, because it has a great deal of nuance and complicates the ways most people think about *Jane Eyre.* This class would be seminar discussion-style, so to begin I would ask the students what the major points of Mintz's argument are, ideally they would mention: (1) although the novel can seem to promote stereotypes, Brontë in fact questions the categories of able-bodied/disabled, sick/healthy, beautiful/ugly, and sane/insane; (2) all of the characters read each other's faces and bodies incorrectly, discrediting the notion that our bodies reflect our quality as individuals; (3) in illness, personhood is defined by how we get care and by who cares about us; (4) disability is not a permanent category, and characters can go back and forth between being healthy and being ill or disabled; (5) *Jane Eyre* both enforces and undermines traditional metaphors and stereotypes about disease and illness. I would next ask students to consider the differences between characters that are described as healthy, moral, sane, well-liked, whole, pure, pious, taken-care of, and beautiful and characters that are sickly, immoral, insane, unpopular, damaged, corrupted, sinful, neglected, and ugly—hopefully finding potential slippages between these categories. To do this I would ask students to point out specific passages from the novel. We would then have an open discussion about the chapter, and then I would ask the students if it changed their opinion(s) about disability in *Jane Eyre.* I plan on using this chapter to show what a novel can do to question societal ideas about the body. The pedagogical goal of assigning this reading is to teach students to read texts more critically, focusing not only on its problems but on the ways it might be progressive, ahead of its time, or unique it its critiques.

"Anxiety or …?":
Disability and Representation in *Dear Evan Hansen*

Presented at the English Student Association Conference, CUNY Graduate Center:
"Breaking Through: Aesthetics and Textures of Rupture," March 23, 2018

Call for Papers: "The degree is in disruption," announces the homepage of the USC Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young Academy for Arts, Technology and the Business of Innovation, home of self-proclaimed "creative philanthropreneur[s]," "eclectic innovator[s]", and "fierce future CEO[s]." As Jill Lepore points out in her critique of the recent trend of disruption as a business model, "everyone is either disrupting or being disrupted. There are disruption consultants, disruption conferences, and disruption seminars." It is to this ubiquity and institutional co-option of disruption as a term and a notion that this conference aims to attend. Why are we so obsessed with "breaking through"? We posit that "rupture" as a concept of breaking through loses much of its value when it is fetishized and only figured as unidirectional, or universally positive, effective, counter-hegemonic. This conference calls for a rigorous unthinking around the space-times of rupture that questions these assumptions and asks, further: Who is licensed to disrupt? To what extent does that which consciously figures itself as disruption in fact create rupture? How do we conceive of disruption that can be so effectively co-opted and redeployed in service of neoliberal agendas? What is it about the aesthetics of rupture that makes them so appealing? So satisfying? To this end, we invite you to think alongside multiple strands of thought that are undoing binaristic and contrapuntal notions that obfuscate and limit our ability to understand agency and the modes in which we might #RESIST. In thinking of ruptures beyond supposed eruptions from below, we posit the need to also think through the violences and inconveniences of living under counter-revolutionary and institutional violence as irruptions from above. The scope of this conference could extend from topics as divergent as analyses of the politics and aesthetics of the Women's March, to thinking through the feelings of satisfaction that some experience from watching internet genre-videos of pimples erupting. We invite scholars from a range of disciplines and methodologies to reconceptualize rupturing in a number of contexts such as: (inter)textual ruptures in period, genre, or medium; ecological crises and irruptions of corporate greed; histories and pedagogies of (dis)ruption; geographies and borders of (ir)/(e)ruption.

Abstract: This paper will examine the politics and problems of disability representation in the award-winning 2016 musical, *Dear Evan Hansen*. By applying disability theory to *Dear Evan Hansen,* it will reveal three issues: first, the dangerous ways in which the musical depicts exaggerated and ambiguous disability, second, how it promotes "overcoming" narratives, and third, how it relies on false universalization of disability. It is not only the text, but the performance and the paratext that create these issues of representation; this paper will explore the ways in which paratextual elements of the musical further stigmatize disability. The paper will engage with the text and lyrics of the musical, performances by several actors playing the title role, interviews about the musical, and advertising materials. The paper will show not only the rupturing of the category of ability and disability, but text and paratext. Overall, though disability is central to *Dear Evan Hansen,* it refuses to examine issues real disabled people face, or discuss disability in any concrete and meaningful way. The musical provides a deeply flawed education on disability that is rife with ethical problems.

Dear Evan Hansen is not the first musical to include a problematic representation of disability, and it certainly will not be the last, but the popularity of the musical makes its harmful depiction even more damaging. Fundamentally, *Dear Evan Hansen* is about disability, although the musical itself refuses to engage with the discourse of disability, both on the textual and paratextual levels. The book and lyrics have sparse references to disability, but mainly avoid the issue; in the show's marketing, disability is never mentioned, instead they use terms like "loner" or "outsider." For a musical about a disabled teenager (Evan Hansen) who pretends he was friends with another disabled teenager (Connor Murphy) who recently committed suicide, it is certainly alarming how little the term *disability* appears in discussions about it or within the text itself. By applying disability theory to *Dear Evan Hansen,* it is possible to reveal three issues: first, the dangerous ways in which the musical depicts exaggerated and ambiguous disability, second, how it promotes "overcoming" narratives, and third, how it relies on false universalization of disability. The problems exist not only in the piece of literature as it is written, but in its non-written elements, such as the performance of the actor playing Evan and the advertising campaigns produced for the musical. Thus, both the text and the paratext of *Dear Evan Hansen* are riddled with problematic disability representations and discussions, all of which are rooted in a severe lack of engagement with disability.

Before entering into the three major issues, it essential to first contextualize with the two major models of disability. The social model states that a disability is a condition that is stigmatized systematically by societal structures[1], whereas the medical model "defines disability as a personal problem, curable and/or treatable by the medical establishment."[2] *Dear Evan Hansen* most explicitly engages with the medical model right in the first scene:

[1] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory*, (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2008), 54-55.
[2] Eli Clare, *Exile & Pride: Queerness, Disability, and Liberation,* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009), 96.

> Heidi: This is what you're supposed to be working on, Evan. With Dr. Sherman?
> Evan: You're right. I'm going to be a lot better.
> Heidi: No, I know. I know you are. And that's why I made you an appointment with Dr. Sherman for this afternoon. I'll pick you up right after school.
> Evan: I already have an appointment next week.
> Heidi: And I thought maybe you could use something a little sooner. [3]

Here Heidi makes decisions *for* Evan about his disability, not consulting with him. This scene represents a "pattern in which a nondisabled expert…interprets and defines the disability experience and controls the life options of the disabled person."[4] Later, Evan confronts his mother about her pathologizaiton of him:

> Evan: They don't think that I'm, that there's something wrong with me, that I need to be fixed, like you do.
> Heidi: When have I *ever* said that?
> Evan: I have to go to therapy, I have to take drugs.
> Heidi: I'm your mother. My job is to take care of you. [5]

Ironically, Heidi is the only character who seems to care about the medical aspect of Evan's disability. The musical as a whole demonizes the medical model and makes Heidi into a villain for being invested in therapy and medication.

The first major issue of disability representation in *Dear Evan Hansen* is the performance of Evan's disability onstage, which includes both textual and paratexual elements. In the text, Evan's is described as having anxiety about interpersonal interactions, a history of meltdowns, and an issue with sweaty hands. These are the only lyrical references to his disability.[6] In both of these songs Evan does not speak of his disability as a *disability,* instead relying on euphemisms like "broken parts," "this mess that I am," and "the worst of me."

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[3] Steven Levenson (book), Benj Pasek (music and lyrics), and Justin Paul (music and lyrics), *Dear Evan Hansen,* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2017), 9.
[4] Victoria Ann Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains,* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2006), xvii.
[5] Levenson, Pasek, and Paul, *Dear Evan Hansen,* 134.
[6] Ibid., 8-9, 35, 77-81, 108, 139-142.

However, in performance, Evan's disability is exaggerated for effect, notably by Ben Platt, the original actor to play Evan. Platt's performance of disability brings up important issues about the social model and how society labels certain people as Other. Petra Cox notes that being publically classified as disabled "often depends on a person's embodiment, specifically how an individual's body is held, placed, and experienced by that individual, as well as how others interpret this embodiment."[7] The performance exaggerates and heightens the visual aspects of Evan's disability, relying on the audience's preconceived ideas about disability. Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes about this process: "Portrayals invoke, reiterate, and are reinforced by cultural stereotypes…The more the portrayal conforms to the social stereotype, the more economical and intense is the effect; representation thus exaggerates an already highlighted difference."[8] Although as a society we have collective ideas about anxiety and anxious behaviors, it is often understood as internal. To make this more visible, Platt performed disability in an exaggerated and generalized way so it clearly reads Other to the audience.

This exaggeration in the performance of Evan's disability is a political choice. Although diagnosing characters is not a productive or generative form of scholarship, it is important to differentiate between Evan's disability mentioned in the script, anxiety, and the disabled that is performed onstage, which has popularly been read as autism. Platt's performance of Evan includes an extremely slouched posture, stuttering, constantly shifting his weigh, closing his eyes while he talks, resting his hands on his waistband, pounding on his chest, rocking back and forth, and self-soothing techniques such as pulling his sleeves over his hands, rubbing his palms on his

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[7] Peta Cox, "Passing as Sane, or How to Get People to Sit Next to You on the Bus" in *Disability and Passing*, 100.
[8] Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies,* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), 11.

pants, and scratching his stomach. None of these physical acting choices are supported by textual evidence, making the autism aspect of Evan's character entirely performance-based.

This issue of diagnosis haunts both the text and the performance. Late in the musical Evan says he is feeling better and his mother asks "So no anxiety or . . . ?"[9]; this ellipsis and question mark seems to define the entire performance of disability. Evan has "anxiety or … ?" which in this case is a silent euphuism for autism. In an interview, Platt addressed this issue with a problematic non-answer:

> I never wanted to isolate anyone from being able to connect to Evan or being able to see something of themselves in him. I get questions, like, 'Is he somebody on the [autism] spectrum?' 'Is it a specific kid that you knew that you're using in your mind?' And my answer is I've taken pieces from all over, from some people that I remember in high school who had a particular difficulty connecting or were particularly lonely. I never wanted to be too specific that you couldn't find something in him that you could relate to or see yourself in.[10]

Platt dodges the question, proving that his performance does not adhere to the textual descriptions of Evan's disability, instead appropriating autism on to a character that was not written as autistic. Platt's problematic acting choices have become a permanent part of the paratext of the musical, with the other actors who play Evan mimicking Platt's autism-inspired performance.[11] This proves there is a fundamental disconnect between the text and the paratext—unlike in the script, the performance is rife with exaggeration and blurring of various disabilities.

The second key problem surrounding disability and representation in the musical is its reliance on what Victoria Ann Lewis calls the "overcoming" narrative. She writes, "The seductive plot possibility of the medical model, with its emphasis on a bodily transformation

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[9] Levenson, Pasek, and Paul, *Dear Evan Hansen,* 108.

[10] Ben Platt, quoted in "Dear Evan Hansen: Ben Platt on Creating his Breakout Character," by Jessica Dershowitz, *Entertainment Weekly,* 30 January 2017.

[11] Jesse Green, "Review: *Dear Evan Hansen* Has a New Evan, and a New Balance," *New York Times,* 1 March 2018.

accomplished by an isolated effort of will, are irresistible in creating conventional dramatic structure….In “overcoming” narratives, disability is a private problem that must be challenged by an act of will on the part of the disabled character.”[12] By allowing Evan to “overcome” his disability, the text implies that disability is something you can beat with enough energy.

Though the plot of *Dear Evan Hansen* may rely on the “overcoming” narrative, it is important to note that Evan does not “overcome” anything. He never gets cured; in fact, he arguably get worse as the musical progress, although he convinces himself otherwise. This process of believing you are getting better is part of a pattern many disabled people go through in which they “are likely to think of themselves as ‘cured’ of their anxiety only when they are not experiencing symptoms.”[13] This destructive coping mechanism can be seen in the musical: when Evan tells his mother that he is feeling better, it is a lie both to her and to himself:

> Heidi: You okay on refills?
> Evan: I’m not taking them anymore.
> Heidi: Oh.
> Evan: I haven’t needed them.
> Heidi: Really? So, no anxiety or . . . ? Even with everything that’s . . . ?
> Evan: I’ve been fine.
> Heidi: Well, great. That’s great. It’s . . . I’m proud of you. [14]

The materiality of this scene, including Heidi asking about refills and shaking a pill bottle, is a clear reminder of the medical model, something Evan is resistant to the entire piece. His political denial of pharmacology and therapy is reflected in the order of his responses: first he says “I’m not taking them anymore” only clarifying why, “I’ve been fine,” afterwards. In this scene Evan ignores his disability in order to evade further medicalization, relying on an “overcoming” narrative.

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[12] Lewis, *Beyond Victims and Villains,* xxii.
[13] Cox, “Passing as Sane,” 105.
[14] Levenson, Pasek, and Paul, *Dear Evan Hansen,* 108.

Within the context of that scene it is also important not to ignore Heidi's final response, "That's great. It's… I'm proud of you." Here she reflects the ableist ethos of the (intended/expected) audiences, who rely on the medical model, encourage pills and therapy, and yet cheer for the "overcoming" narrative. No one should be *proud* when Evan stops taking his medication. But far from being proud of disability, Evan, Heidi, and the audience stigmatize it and are ashamed of it. Thus, when Evan says he does not need his medication anymore, his mother is proud; similarly the audience is more than happy for Evan's disability to disappear, instead focusing on the "overcoming" narrative and ignoring disability as much as possible.

In order for Evan, Hiedi, and the audience to accept the "overcoming" and ignore disability, Evan must separate himself from Connor, the other disabled character. Evan's attempt at distancing his disability from Connor's is a perfect case study for the unscrupulous ethics of the musical. Though Evan is clearly ashamed of his own disability, he refuses to name it or talk about it directly. Connor's disability is also not mentioned or discussion definitively, but Evan makes it clear that he is *not* like Connor, despite the many parallels. Both are characterized as loners, socially awkward, struggling with mental illness, failing at passing, and most dramatically, suicidal. Heidi is the first to help the audience make this connection:

> Heidi: I got an email from your school today. About boy who killed himself? Connor Murphy? I didn't, I had no idea.
> Evan: Oh. Yeah. Well. . . I didn't really know him.
> Heidi: …. [Your cast] says "Connor."
> Evan: Oh. Yeah. No.
> Heidi: You said you didn't know him.
> Evan: No. I didn't. This is . . . it's a different Connor.
> Heidi: I was so worried.
> Evan: No. I'm sure….
> Heidi: Are you okay on refills?
> Evan: Yes.[15]

[15] Ibid., 48-49.

Here Evan goes out of his way to distance himself from Connor, constantly repeating the word "no." Despite his conviction of difference, it is clear that Heidi feels Evan could be the next Connor ("I was so worried,"), resorting to the medical model for reassurance ("Are you okay on refills?"). Later when it is revealed that Evan tells his mother that he *was* another Connor, that he attempted suicide, Heidi says "I didn't know that you were hurting like that. That you felt so…I didn't know. How did I not know?" but then ignores him and sings a selfish balls "So Big / So Small," completely avoiding the issue, happy to live in her fantasy that that was the past and that Evan is "cured" now.[16]

Evan may be able to convince his mother he is cured and is nothing like Connor, but convincing himself is a much harder battle. During one of (post-mortem) Connor and his ambiguous conversations/hallucinations, Connor confronts him on their similarities:

> Connor: Nobody cares about people like us.
> Evan: "People like us"?
> Connor: Connor Murphy: the kid who threw a printer at Mrs. G. in second grade. Or Evan Hansen: the kid who stood outside a jazz band concert trying to talk to Zoe Murphy, but his hands were too sweaty. You know. People like that.[17]

Connor declares that no matter how much Evan chooses to ignore it, he belongs with him in the "people like us" disabled category; he cannot hide behind euphemisms forever. The collective coping mechanism then becomes not looking for parallels but establishing differences. Connor wears all black, paints his nails, has long hair, and does drugs; Evan wears a polo shirt and spent his summer as an apprentice park ranger. Connor gets called a "psychopath," clearly disabled, while Evan is branded a mere "outsider," a term with much less stigma and connotations.[18]

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[16] Ibid., 156-159.
[17] Ibid., 78.
[18] Ibid., 18.

Connor kills himself; Evan is feeling better, does not need medication anymore, he has "overcome" whatever ambiguous disabled he had.

The third crucial problem in how *Dear Evan Hansen* represents disability is its blatant universalization of Evan. In order to make the musical more popular, Evan has been branded as an Everyman. Perhaps the best example of this universalization is the marketing video series "We Are Evan Hansen:" which all begin with a cacophony of voices repeating the phrase "we are Evan Hansen" [19] as if trying to convince the viewer that it's true, an attempt to join to universalizing cult of Evan Hansen. In an earlier promotional video, a cast member states "I think Evan represents everyone."[20] Similarly, Platt himself said that "everyone can relate to Evan Hansen."[21] What is most alarming about this process, which is by in large achieved through marketing, is that Evan is *not* an Everyman character, nothing about him or his story is ordinary. Evan is *disabled*, and disability is not universal; we are not all disabled, therefore we are *not* all Evan Hansen. This fact has been ignored by the creators, actors, press, and audiences alike.

In order to effectively brainwash the public into believing the "We Are Evan Hansen" advertising campaign, Evan himself had to become universal, which first meant he had to be seen not as disabled but as something less stigmatized. The result of this re-branding is the multitude of euphemisms that publicity materials use to describe Evan, such as "loner," "outsider," "outcast," "desperate to belong," "just a lonely teenager."[22] From a theoretical perspective, the paratext of *Dear Evan Hansen* is attempting to achieve what Lewis calls *strategic constructionism,* which "aims at exposing the 'constructedness' of disability identity in

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[19] *Dear Evan Hansen* YouTube Chanel, "We Are Evan Hansen" Series, YouTube videos, 21 April 2017—19 June 2017.
[20] *Dear Evan Hansen* YouTube Chanel, "Who is Evan Hansen?" YouTube video, 24 July 2015.
[21] Platt, quoted from the Tony Awards Press Room on 11 June 2017.
[22] *Dear Evan Hansen* YouTube Chanel, "Who is Evan Hansen?" YouTube video, 24 July 2015.

order to eliminate it."[23] It endeavors to transcend disability by removing stigma and "curing" the only supposedly minor mental illness, rendering the Otherness of Evan less deviant or dramatic, and instead transforming him into a character that is likeable, relatable, and universal. By making Evan universal the musical achieves two major goals: first, it helps increase the popularity of the musical because it has a relatable protagonist that teenagers love, and second, it provides justification for the show to not feel required to have any serious discussion of disability.

However, Evan is not like everyone else; not only is he disabled but he makes some extremely unethical choices. We should not pride ourselves on being just like Evan, he pretends he was friends with Connor, forges emails in Connor's name, manipulates Zoe into dating him, lies to his mother and to Connor's family, and accepts thousands of dollars for a fake charity. As Evan's friend Jared points out

> Jared: You know, when you really stop and think about it, Connor being dead, that's pretty much that best thing that ever happened to you, isn't it?
> Evan: That's a horrible thing to say.
> Jared: Well, but, no, think about it. If Connor hadn't died, no one would even know who you are. I mean, people at school actually *talk* to you now. You're almost . . . *popular.* Which is . . . wonder of wonder, miracle of miracles.
> Evan: I don't care about any of that. I don't care if people at school know who I am, I just want to help the Murphys.
> Jared: Help the Murphys. Yeah. I know. You keep saying that. [24]

In this scene Evan not only tries to convince Jared that he is making moral choices, but also himself. Tellingly, Jared remains unconvinced, stating that regardless of Evan's refrains, he still doubts Evan's virtuousness. The beloved and "relatable" Evan is nowhere near a beacon of virtue nor a proper role model for the hordes of teenage audience members who see the show daily.

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[23] Victoria Ann Lewis, "The Dramaturgy of Disability," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 27.3 (1998).
[24] Levenson, Pasek, and Paul, *Dear Evan Hansen,* 124.

Structurally, *Dear Evan Hansen* takes a large risk in assuming that audience will forgive Evan at the end of the musical. As a character he makes all the wrong choices, and they are not only mistakes, but they are major moral and ethical wrongdoings. Evan trepidatiously walks the fine line between flawed hero and loveable villain, and it is miraculous that he comes out triumphant. In an article for *Vogue,* Adam Green writes, "Platt and the show's authors say that one of their biggest concerns has been making sure that the audience continues to root for Evan even as he makes some morally dubious choices."[25] Only when the text and paratext combine is Evan saved; this magical moment of moral reversal occurs in the tear-jerking song "Words Fail." In this song, Evan cries his way through a confession; in performance this scene is so devastating, it is as if you are given no choice but to forgive him.

Dear Evan Hansen may attempt to ignore disability, but because it is a central theme of the piece, it cannot avoid it completely. A disability studies reading reveals that the musical relies on an exaggerated but nonspecific performance of disability, an "overcoming" narrative, and false universalization. Far from transcending stereotypes of disability, it enforces the problematic images of disability that already exist in modern culture. It teaches its mostly young audience that one disability (autism) can stand in for another (anxiety), that there are "good" (Evan) and "bad" (Connor) types of disabled people, that disability can be "overcome" with enough will power, that medicine is bad and you can choose to stop taking it whenever you want, that disability is universal and that everyone can relate to it. It provides a deeply flawed education on disability that is rife with ethical problems. It refuses to examine issues real disabled people face, or discuss disability in any concrete and meaningful way. At its core, *Dear Evan Hansen* does not explore disability, it appropriates it.

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[25] Adam Green, "Meet Ben Platt, Broadway Breakout Star of *Dear Evan Hansen,*" *Vogue,* 12 June 2017.

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Disability and Representation in *Dear Evan Hansen*

#81811

Major Issues

1. Performance of disability
2. “Overcoming” narratives
3. False universalization of disability

Medical Model

Heidi: This is what you're supposed to be working on, Evan. With Dr. Sherman?

Evan: You're right. I'm going to be a lot better.

Heidi: No, I know. I know you are. And that's why I made you an appointment with Dr. Sherman for this afternoon. I'll pick you up right after school.

Evan: I already have an appointment next week.

Heidi: And I thought maybe you could use something a little sooner.

Medical Model

Evan: They don’t think that I’m, that there’s something wrong with me, that I need to be fixed, like you do.

Heidi: When have I *ever* said that?

Evan: I have to go to therapy, I have to take drugs.

Heidi: I’m your mother. My job is to take care of you.

1. Performance of Evan's Disability

Being publically classified as disabled "often depends on a person's **embodiment**, specifically **how an individual's body is held**, placed, and experienced by that individuals, as well as how others interpret this embodiment."

—Peta Cox

"Portrayals invoke, reiterate, and are reinforced by **cultural stereotypes**…The more the portrayal conforms to the social stereotype, the more economical and intense is the effect; **representation thus exaggerates an already highlighted difference**."

—Rosemarie Garland Thomson

Evan's Disability: Text

Evan:

I've learned to slam on the break, before I even turn the key,

Before I make the mistake, before I lead with ***the worst of me****.*

Give them no reason to stare. *No slipping up if you slip away.*

So I got nothing to say. No, I got nothing to say….

On the outside *always looking in, will I ever be more than I've always been?*

'Cause I'm tap tap taping on the glass, waving through a window.

No I'd rather pretend I'm something better than ***these broken parts****.*

Pretend I'm something other than ***this mess that I am***.

Evan’s Disability: Paratext / Performance

- slouched posture
- stuttering
- constantly shifting his weight
- closing his eyes while he talks
- resting his hands on his waistband
- pounding on his chest
- rocking back and forth
- self-soothing techniques
- pulling his sleeves over his hands
- rubbing his palms on his pants
- scratching his stomach

Evan’s Disability: Paratext / Performance

Ben Platt: “**I never wanted to isolate anyone from being able to connect to Evan or being able to see something of themselves in him**. I get questions, like, ‘**Is he somebody on the [autism] spectrum?’** ‘Is it a specific kid that you knew that you’re using in your mind?’ And my answer is **I’ve taken pieces from all over**, from some people that I remember in high school who had **a particular difficulty connecting or were particularly lonely. I never wanted to be too specific that you couldn’t find something in him that you could relate to or see yourself in**.”

2. “Overcoming Narrative”

“The seductive plot possibility of the medical model, with its emphasis on a bodily transformation accomplished by an isolated effort of will, are irresistible in creating conventional dramatic structure….In “overcoming” narratives, disability is a private problem that must be challenged by an act of will on the part of the disabled character.”

—Victoria Ann Lewis

“Overcoming” Narratives: Being “Cured”

Heidi: You okay on refills?

Evan: I’m not taking them anymore.

Heidi: Oh.

Evan: I haven’t needed them.

Heidi: Really? So, no anxiety or . . . ? Even with everything that’s . . . ?

Evan: I’ve been fine.

Heidi: Well, great. That’s great. It’s . . . I’m proud of you.

“Overcoming” Narratives: Contrast to Connor

Heidi: I got an email from your school today. About boy who killed himself? Connor Murphy? I didn’t, I had no idea.

Evan: Oh. Yeah. Well. . . I didn’t really know him.

Heidi: .... [Your cast] says “Connor.”

Evan: Oh. Yeah. No.

Heidi: You said you didn’t know him.

Evan: No. I didn’t. This is . . . it’s a different Connor.

Heidi: I was so worried.

Evan: No. I’m sure....

Heidi: Are you okay on refills?

Evan: Yes.

“Overcoming” Narratives: Contrast to Connor

Connor: Nobody cares about people like us.

Evan: “People like us”?

Connor: Connor Murphy: the kid who threw a printer at Mrs. G. in second grade. Or Evan Hansen: the kid who stood outside a jazz band concert trying to talk to Zoe Murphy, but his hands were too sweaty. You know. People like that.

3. False Universalization

"*Strategic constructionism* aims at exposing the 'constructedness' of disability identity in order to eliminate it."

—Victoria Ann Lewis

False Universalization: Advertising

- “**We** are Evan Hansen” videos
- “I think Evan **represents everyone**”
- “**Everyone can relate** to Evan Hansen”

False Universalization: Ethics

Jared: You know, when you really stop and think about it, Connor being dead, that's pretty much that best thing that ever happened to you, isn't it?

Evan: That's a horrible thing to say.

Jared: Well, but, no, think about it. If Connor hadn't died, no one would even know who you are. I mean, people at school actually *talk* to you now. You're almost . . . *popular.* Which is . . . wonder of wonder, miracle of miracles.

Evan: I don't care about any of that. I don't care if people at school know who I am, I just want to help the Murphys.

Jared: Help the Murphys. Yeah. I know. You keep saying that.

Problematic Lessons

1. One disability (autism) can stand in for another (anxiety)
2. There are “good” (Evan) and “bad” (Connor) types of disabled people
3. Disability can be “overcome” with enough will power
4. Medicine is bad and you can choose to stop taking it whenever you want
5. Disability is universal and everyone can relate to it