

Jay Dolmage. *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. 254 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-472-05371-1.

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In recent years, disability studies scholars in rhetoric have contributed significantly to expanding critical engagement with access in institutions of higher education. In *The Question of Access*, Tanya Titchkosky challenged readers to understand access as a perceptual and relational process, and to ask critical questions about how students, staff, and faculty were situated within university bureaucracies as “half in” and “half out.”[1] Margaret Price’s *Mad at School* focused attention on mental disability in the academy, exposing the structural able-mindedness of classrooms, institutional practices, and intellectual discourse. Especially useful from a teaching perspective has been Price’s invitation to creatively reimagine the expectations inherent in “kairotic” spaces of the university—classroom discussion, of-office hours, presentations, group work, and even social activities—to lessen potential anxiety and allow “ways to move.”[2] Building upon these as well as other pathbreaking scholars such as Stephanie Kerschbaum and Sarah Ahmed, whose work exposes systemic exclusions in the neoliberal university, Jay Dolmage’s instant classic, *Academic Ableism*, develops an intensive analysis of institutional histories, structural barriers, and contemporary practices in higher education.[3] Applying rhetoric, which he defines as “the circulation of discourse through the body,” Dolmage lays out the compulso-

ry able-bodied- and able-mindedness of academic history and provides critical tools for understanding how bodies have been shaped and allowed to move within and in relation to institutions of higher learning (p. 8).

Dolmage organizes several chapters explicitly around keywords evoking historical barriers and institutional approaches to access: steep steps, the retrofit, and universal design for learning (UDL). He situates these images as “spatial metaphors” from the field of disability studies that “nicely articulate the ways space excludes, the way space can be redesigned, and the ways space can be more inclusively conceived” (p. 41). As he traces the steep steps of the academy, Dolmage critically analyzes the history of higher education through intersectional lenses, tying contemporary ableism to enduring racial, gendered, and economic inequities. In this process, the metaphor becomes infused with more meaning—as not only the architecture, but the worldview, orientation, and practice of the academy. In mapping this history, he examines the rise of land-grant universities in the early to mid-1800s. Not only were these institutions ushered in upon the heels of forced removals of indigenous people, but they were often connected to newly emerging institutions for people with disabilities—people who were rendered powerless, and who were infinitely available to academic

elites as research objects. Indeed, the elitism of higher education was defined by its exclusions: people of color, women, the working classes, and disabled people, among other marginalized groups. Expanding on the steep steps symbol, Dolmage harkens back to the quintessential image of eugenic hierarchies used in the early 1900s in which “mental defectives” are ordered on a staircase of diagnostic categories, with “idiot” on the ground floor, “low” to “high grade imbecile” on the next three, and “moron” on the top (p. 64). Infused with deeply embedded racial hierarchies, eugenics provided another “scientific” lens through which researchers could exploit bodyminds excluded from the ivory tower and use the findings to enhance white, patriarchal, able-bodied/able-minded privilege and power. Dolmage develops compelling connections between these violent histories and the more concealed contemporary violence experienced by diverse and disabled students in higher education. Connecting examples of campus surveillance of students of color, fumbling of sexual violence complaints, rigid provisions of disability accommodations, combined with questions of how university cultures produce unwellness, Dolmage argues that the “university hides ableism [and racism, sexism] behind idealism” (p. 48). In other words, institutions protect the veneer of goodness, while masking their own complicity in putting specific groups at risk of failure.

In the post-Americans with Disabilities Act era, those of us working in higher education have become familiar with retrofit approaches to addressing inaccessibility. The paradigmatic images of the retrofit include ramps, elevators, or accessible bathrooms—modifications added to buildings in an effort to address the exclusionary origins of architectural design. Even more than physical design, the retrofit reflects a philosophical approach to disability that reanimates ableism and forces students with disabilities to engage in a fatiguing, never-ending cycle of making access requests, which, if outside the commonplace offers of extended test time and note-taking, are often inter-

preted as excessive demands. Dolmage argues compellingly that retrofits—to address physical space and accommodation requests—could be better understood as “abeyance structures,” as fixes and processes designed as much around holding back access as they are successful in providing it (p. 77). Guided by legal requirements and medical gatekeeping that require individual proof from students and result in reluctant offers of “reasonable accommodations” by institutions, retrofits offer students a way in, but also infinite possibilities for deferrals and denials. As a philosophical approach, the retrofit comes in as an afterthought, an add-on. Understood in this way, the retrofit functions seamlessly with the business model of the neoliberal university, which constructs disability as a “drain, a threat, something to be eradicated or erased” (p. 83). As Dolmage claims, one of the key problems with retrofit approaches is the relationships they create between disabled students and institutions of higher learning. Even as students are provided with more resources, the ableist belief systems that have been part of the steep steps of academic culture are left largely unchallenged and intact.

More recently, disability access has come under the umbrella of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in higher education; in an effort to address the steep steps history and inadequacies of retrofit approaches, many institutions have introduced universal design (UD) and UDL. Turning to contemporary approaches and imagining more exciting crip futures, Dolmage maps out pathways to maximize the potential of UD, while also cautioning against allowing UD to be appropriated by the market forces driving contemporary universities. One of the great strengths of *Academic Ableism* lies in the bridges it constructs between historical contexts and legacies of exclusion and contemporary efforts to dismantle ableism by designing with disability in mind. Once readers gain more understanding of the structural mechanisms working against disabled students’ success, they may be more invested in heeding Dolmage’s warnings

against superficial approaches to inclusion—those that fail to address underlying ableism in the academy. For example, Dolmage cites problematic ways UD and UDL are packaged and sold in higher education. Too often, the benefits are touted as serving everyone, the message being that if the majority of students benefit from architectural and pedagogical access, these are strategies worthy of investment. However, this framing often results in partial efforts within institutions, or worse, as a way to reallocate already scarce resources away from students with disabilities. In celebratory appropriations of UD, the real needs of marginalized students risk being erased; in effect, such students are required to accept what Sara Ahmed describes as “melancholic universalism,” which expects students to identify with a universal that repudiates them (p. 134). Instead, *Academic Ableism* reminds us to be mindful of and vigilant in exposing the extra labor required of marginalized students in the academy; to highlight the extra labor involved in navigating accommodations and gaining access; and to consider the legacy of structural exclusions as we consider the complexities and labor involved in building communities within and between students of color, students with disabilities, and other students inhabiting liminal spaces in the academy.

With these significant caveats, Dolmage also works to unpack the potential of UD and UDL and provide crucial strategies for maximizing these efforts. Conceptually, he argues for reanimating UD as a verb: as a way to move, a manner of trying, a form of hope, as being in process, and seeing space as having expanded possibilities (pp. 116-17). In reorienting toward design as process, Dolmage suggests thinking in terms of “deep accessibility” and “transformative access” (pp. 118-19). Deep accessibility pushes faculty, staff, and administrators to address access expansively across physical, cognitive, and sensory domains—to proactively consider movement, sensory engagement, spaces, communication, and belonging. Transformative access challenges those of us committed to meaning-

ful inclusion to move beyond *allowing* or *providing* access or accommodations to rethinking these conceptual structures altogether. In effect, UD and UDL will be most successful if such efforts are grounded in disability studies and connected institutionally to efforts to dismantle racism, sexism, settler colonialism, and other oppressive legacies.

In fact, as I have worked to expand the reach of disability studies and the practice of UDL at my own institution, *Academic Ableism* has provided a robust foundation for collaborations with colleagues. In a year-long pilot group on universal design and inclusive pedagogy that I co-facilitated, we selected Dolmage’s book as a guiding text before working explicitly on UDL principles and practices. Our group was comprised of faculty and administrators already deeply committed to supporting diverse and marginalized students, and even this audience, well versed in histories of racial, ethnic, and gender exclusions, gained crucial insight from Dolmage’s book. As a group, we applied historic and future-oriented insights to our engagement with and applications of UDL to our classrooms and programs. Notably, this text encouraged deeper conversations and engagement with accessibility, while keeping us mindful of the heavy lifting involved in meaningful attempts to dismantle ableism in the academy.

Ultimately, the guiding framework of *Academic Ableism*—one dependent upon disability studies for its project of dismantling structural ableism—is an intersectional crip weaving of histories and futures. As Dolmage suggests, “I want to center the idea that we must design a future for higher education that acknowledges but rejects its eugenic, steep steps history, refuses to accept an ongoing series of retrofits and slapped-on accommodations, and values instead the unpredictable times and places of disability to come” (p. 124). This future orientation, which demands intentional grappling with ableism as part of the exclusionary foundation of higher education, makes *Academic Ableism* an essential text for disability studies and for any-

one interested in the difficult and essential work of diversity, equity, and inclusion in academic life.

Notes

[1]. Tanya Titchkosky, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 27.

[2]. Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 58.

[3]. Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 2014); Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

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