

Forum Introduction: Reflections on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Erving Goffman's *Stigma*
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The plenary session at SDS 2013 on "Reflections on the Fiftieth Anniversary of *Stigma*" marked the fiftieth anniversary of Erving Goffman's *Stigma*.

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We dedicate this to the memory of Adrienne Asch, disability studies scholar, advocate, bioethicist, colleague, friend.

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Roadkill Truths

Rereading *Stigma* recently for this panel was as unsettling for me as it was when Irv Zola made me read this little book twenty-five years ago. The book's effect on me is something like witnessing roadkill: the shock of seeing a thing familiar and unremarkable splayed open in a disarray, exposing a reeking but somehow affirming truth about life.

My first encounter with Goffman's *Stigma* was in my graduate studies in English at Brandies University. I was the only person I knew thinking, talking, and writing about representations of disability. My approach and theoretical framing for addressing disability came from feminist studies. My colleagues and the faculty in English found my project original and interesting. Nobody had ever thought about disability and literature: "Gee, are there any disabled characters in American literature," they asked supportively. With alacrity, I cited the now familiar list ranging from Bradstreet, Melville, Hawthorne, Faulkner, Steinbeck, to Morrison and on. I tossed in Shakespeare because recent work on race and gender—on Othello, Ophelia, Caliban—offered an analogy to what I had in mind.

About midway through my doctoral work, my advisor casually asked if I knew a sociology professor at Brandeis he thought did work in disability. That sociologist was Irv Zola, the founder of disability studies, leader of SDS, and editor of *Disability Studies Quarterly*—which was a mimeographed newsletter at the time. Having kept my nose down at Brandeis because I had three small children and a commute, I had never heard of Irv, even though his wife Judy was one of the authors of *Our Bodies Ourselves*, the familiar canonical feminist activist manifesto that addressed disability as part of women's experience. Clearly I didn't know how to read for disability like I do now. I knew it was in literature, but not everywhere else.

Irv was a generous, avuncular self-proclaimed "Polio," with leg braces, an idiosyncratic gait, elegant cane, and some sassy in-group irony that was all completely new to me. He told me about passing his whole life for nondisabled until politicized identity politics freed him to come out as disabled and to use the technologies he needed to access the world he needed to live in. Of course, the story astounded me because he seemed to me a perfectly obvious Goffmanian *cripple*—although I certainly never had or would use such words—whom I could not have imagined occupying disability identity with ambivalence. He was the first disabled person I had ever spoken with about disability identity and experience, and certainly the first person I'd known well and with whom I could identify who had a politicized consciousness about disability.

Irv welcomed and inaugurated me into disability studies with his astonishing six shelves of disability studies books and an adamant invitation to SDS. If there were books, this was a field. Neither my advisors in English nor I knew to look for disability theory in sociology. Irv immediately drew down from his shelves two books for me: Irving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* and Robert Bogdan's *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities For Amusement and Profit*. As I grasped both the books and the titles simultaneously, they felt like a heap of hot coals in my hands. "Come on," Irv coaxed, continuing with something like "if I could take what these books contain, you can take it too." These lurid titles expressed my worst disability nightmares; they screamed at me the collective accusation I had for my

entire life persistently navigated and circumvented with all the dignity I could muster; they confirmed that disability had spoiled me and made me a freak. These promised to be book-length versions of the primal scene of disability experience: the demand to account for oneself, to offer some long-rehearsed apologia to the interrogation—sometimes explicit, other times implicit— "What's Wrong with You?" When I could finally bring myself to read *Freak Show* and *Stigma*—only because Irv made me do it—I came to recognize that Goffman's little book did in fact brutally illuminate this archetypal disability call and response just as I had sensed my whole life. I saw myself in *Stigma* in ways that I had sensed others saw me and that I was indeed bonded by this to what Goffman's so quaintly called my "own kind" (28). This uncanny affirmation generated from me three responses that have shaped my work.

First, *Stigma* made me *disabled*. The affect of experience of reading *Stigma* is to identify with the invitational "we" that is a convention of Goffman's rhetorical narrative style. By coolly noting what he calls the "pivotal fact" that "The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do; (7) Goffman issues a rhetorical invitation to what race theorist W.E.B. Dubois described in 1903 as "double consciousness," the experiential paradox between one's *felt* and *ascribed* identities. Simply put, one's felt identity is how one experiences oneself as an embodied, perceiving, conscious subject at the center of one's own world. One's ascribed identity is the subject position other people project upon one or understand one to occupy. Reading the rough, gaudy prose of "abominations of the body" (4); "shameful differentness," (10); "atrocious tales" (25); "spoiled identities," and "contagious moral blemish[es]" (35); functions as an unnervingly poetic hailing to the stigmatizing social rituals of disability identity. Form and content merge, then, in the rhetorical experience of entering the perverse taxonomy of "normals" (5) and the "stigmatized."

Second, *Stigma* gave me what is my signature contribution to disability studies: the Normate. The critical term *normate* has, as I like to say, legs. It has moved into the vocabulary of disability studies because it apparently answers the need to make something in a single word that went unnamed. *Normate* is not my word, however, but I bequeathed this Goffmanesque term to

disability studies in the 1997 book, *Extraordinary Bodies*. The word came to me at my first SDS, probably in 1989. The president of SDS, Daryl Evans, mockingly flung out the word *normate* from a SDS session podium with confrontational ironic distance. At first encounter, Daryl, an established sociologist like all of the SDS leaders at the time, looked like a typical wiry, hip academic type with cool glasses, great Harpo Marx hair, and a sensitive mouth that was quick to sneer. Only his delicate, paperwhite skin—eerily like the drowned Ophelia in Millais's haunting painting—witnessed a fragility in Darrell that emanated perhaps from his tightly managed seizure disorder itself and the vigilance that management required of him. Not long after that, Daryl committed suicide. Daryl could pass for a normate, which is a burden for anyone, of course, because it is such a fragile position, what I called "the social figure with which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. With the word, *normate* Daryl gathered the cumulative burden of Goffman's terrible truth and spew it out with the force of an exorcism.

Third, by the end of his little book Goffman exposes the ultimate paradox in the system of social relations he so luridly lays out. If you can become inured to that strange assaultive 1963 prose in *Stigma*, that almost Whitmanian vivid catalog of stigmatized diversity: cripple, bastard, moron, physically deformed, blind, illiterate, homosexual, ex-convicts, prostitutes, drug addicts, homosexuals, alcoholics, the deaf, the divorced, Jews, mental defectives, the hard of hearing, ...the "tribally stigmatized," (23), this is nub of truth you eventually infer: that in the perpetual tally of Darwinian status encounters that comprise Goffmanian social life, the stigmatized are certainly "deeply discredited," but the normals have at best a "shaky" advantage (18). Indeed, despite all of the normals' "righteously presented demands," Goffman avers that "the most fortunate of normals is likely to have his half hidden failing, and for every little failing there is a social occasion when it will loom large, creating a shameful gap virtual and actual social identity. Therefore the occasionally precarious and the constantly precarious form a single continuum" (2, 127). Maybe Daryl Evans didn't know this.

Works Cited

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