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CHAPTER ONE

Steep Steps



David Orr, from a recent article entitled “Architecture as Pedagogy”:

“The curriculum embedded in any building instructs as fully and as powerfully as any course taught in it.” (212)

In this chapter, I will continue to interrogate and remap the spaces and interfaces of the North American university, analyzing the ways that educational institutions have “limit[ed] public access and interaction in such a way as to avoid the chance encounter of diverse populations, creating a series of protected interior and isolated spaces” (Hardt and Negri, 188), as well as the ways that we might more actively, inclusively design our teaching in response to, and with an awareness of, this architecture. I will put forward three images through my first three chapters: steep steps, the retrofit, and universal design. These three images represent spatial metaphors that come from within the field of disability studies and nicely articulate the ways space excludes, the ways space can be redesigned, and the ways space can be more inclusively conceived. My criteria for selecting these metaphors is a simple one: I want them to be readily recognizable. Teachers might experience these spaces every day as they come to work—and not just when they encounter steps or ramps in the approach to the classroom or studio, but also in its layout, in classroom texts, in responses to student work, in paper prompts or assign-

ments, in workshop and collaborative design, on class message boards or websites, in labs. The metaphors are also spaces that are produced, ideologically, in the world in which we move. First of all, the university erects steep steps to keep certain bodies and minds out. Secondly, to retrofit our structures for access, we add ramps at the sides of buildings and accommodations to the standard curriculum—still, disability can never come in the front entrance. But finally, in theory and practice, we can recognize the ways that teaching can be universally designed—how we might create an enabling space for learning and a way to think broadly and inclusively about ability.

With my words, I want to try and create a new map of higher education, a map that recognizes the ways students with disabilities have been excluded, the ways the academy has accommodated them, as well as the ways that disability, as an identity and an epistemology, as a way of being in the world and making meaning in the world, will continue to push us to understand teaching and learning in new, broader, and more empowering ways.

Architectures of Ableism

So the first premise of this chapter is that we need to care about space. To begin with, we do think spatially—we readily perceive the world in terms of physical space and spatial relations. Thus, spaces already convey information, and reconstructing or reimagining these spaces is an act of persuasion.

There is a phrase that many disability studies teachers have heard from colleagues over and over again, noted first by Amy Vidali who noticed how often other teachers said to her “but there are no disabled students in my class.” This statement is a kind of apologia for not creating an inclusive classroom. The statement is something that Vidali and other disability scholars find sad and ironic and maybe a bit humorous: it is statistically and practically nearly impossible. The sad or scary part is that this statement sounds or feels like a wish or a desire. That wish or desire for higher education without disability is academic ableism in a nutshell, and it is rooted in eugenics, as I showed in my “approach.” But by more literally mapping disability as a reality and an important, contributing population in colleges and universities, there is a move to refuse this desire for academia and for an educational space without disability.

As David Harvey and others have argued, “representations of places have material consequences insofar as fantasies, desires, fears and longings are expressed in actual behavior” (*From Space to Place*, 22). Spaces, and how we write about them, think about them and move through them, suggest and delimit attitudes. As Stewart Brand wrote in *How Buildings Learn*, the term architecture means “unchanging deep structure” (2). But this is an illusion: building “means both the action and the verb build and ‘that which is built’” (2). Buildings are “always building and rebuilding. The idea is crystalline, the fact fluid” (2). Yet Rob Imrie has written about the “design apartheid” against people with disabilities—the methodical exclusion of disabled people from planning, architecture, and design decision making. This exclusion maps a wish: “there are no people with disabilities here.” In this way, disabled people have been traditionally excluded both from buildings and from the ongoing building of academia. As Brendan Gleeson shows, “Disabled people in Western societies have been oppressed by the production of space . . . due in part to their exclusion from the discourses and practices that shape the physical layout of societies” (2).

Further, as Tanya Titchkosky argues, “the mapping of disability is an imparting of some version of what disability is and, thus, contains implicit directions for how to move around, through or with it. . . . disability has a long history of being mapped as if it is a foreign land, and a distanced curiosity remains one of the most repetitive, debilitating, yet ‘normal’ ways of regarding the life and work of disabled people” (“Cultural Maps,” 101, 109). In the modern university, students with disabilities are kept far away from the discussions within which their input could be most illuminating, most challenging. This exclusion extends from dialogue to infrastructure: as Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell write, “the built environment also includes the mythologies, images and characterizations about disability that comprise the majority of interactions in our imaginary lives” (Narrative, xiv). Yet, as Snyder and Mitchell write, “we cannot know a culture until we ask its disabled citizens to assess it” (Narrative, 178). Likewise, we cannot understand academia until we interrogate it from the viewpoint of disability. Allow me to repeat myself: if rhetoric is the circulation of discourse through the body, then spaces and institutions cannot be disconnected from the bodies within them, the bodies they selectively exclude, and the bodies that actively intervene to reshape them.

As I will show, disability is a reality—in the lives of those who claim this identity and in the lives of those who believe themselves immune. Dis-

ability is also produced, sometimes most powerfully, by our uses of space. If the teacher wants to, above all, treat students ethically and respectfully, she must consider the spaces where she teaches in terms of disciplinary attitudes, but also in terms of bricks and mortar, walls and steps, and pixels and bits that exclude bodies. The disciplinary and the institutional, the discursive and the physical, must be considered always in interaction. We need to start with exclusion. While in civic planning we have premises like Henri Lefebvre's claim of a "right to the city," where the mandate of the city as a social construction is to serve all its citizens (and not only an exclusive set), academic ableism leads us to believe that in fact there are some specific bodies and minds that do not at all have a right to the university. The connected feeling is that the spaces and architectures of the university have been and should continue to be designed to filter out certain bodies and minds. The spatial metaphor for this process is the steep steps.

Again, in this chapter, there will be discussion of eugenics, rape, sexual harassment, and sexual coercion. These matters may be especially triggering for some readers as I will be discussing the ways that colleges and universities refuse responsibility, deny justice, and silence victims.

Steep Steps to Ivory Towers

The steep steps metaphor describes how the university has been constructed as a place for the very able. The steep steps metaphor puts forward the idea that access to the university is a movement upwards—only the truly "fit" survive this climb. University campuses have lots of steep steps—but the entire university experience can also be metaphorized as a movement up steep steps. The steep steps, physically and figuratively, lead to the ivory tower. The tower is built upon ideals and standards—historically, this is an identity that the university has embraced. I want to suggest that we have mapped the university in this way—as a climb up the stairs of the ivory tower—for particular reasons. Often, maps are created not to reveal exclusion, but to create it. Mapping is traditionally a mode of closing-off, of containment. Simply, maps cut people out much more than they fit people in. David Sibley, the cultural geographer who has perhaps most extensively theorized the exclusionary potential of spatialization, extends this idea of "structuring subjectivity." He writes that "space and society are implicated in the construction of the boundaries of the self but . . . the self is also projected onto society and onto space"

(86). Simply, how we want to understand ourselves affects how we construct and experience space. The way we think of ourselves is projected onto our classroom space. When someone says “there are no disabled students in my class,” this is a map of fear, perhaps (access Vidali). But it is also voicing a desire. There is a fear of the presence of disability and a desire for its opposite: its eradication and exclusion. The steep steps metaphor sums up the ways the university constructs spaces that exclude. The self or selves that have been projected upon the space of the university are not just able-bodied and normal, but exceptional, elite. This projection unites many other discourses of normativity: whiteness, heteronormativity, empire, colonialism, masculinity. In connected ways, these discourses push down and mark some bodies while insisting on the natural, unmarked place of the privileged at the top of the steps. The same thing happens, often concurrently, with the marking of minds. The university pulls some people slowly up the stairs, and it arranges others at the bottom of this steep incline. The university also steps our society, reinforcing hierarchies and divisions. For instance, as previously mentioned, people with disabilities have been traditionally seen as objects of study in higher education, rather than as teachers or students. Disability has been a rhetorically produced stigma that could be applied to other marginalized groups to keep them out of the university (and away from access to resources and privileges).

The steps work as well to teach students to look down upon those on the steps below them while they carefully maintain their own positions. As Carol Schick argues in an essay entitled “Keeping the Ivory Tower White,” white students’ “bourgeois white identification relies on their allegiance to prestigious white space and their access to privilege and social respectability. They depend on university processes,” even those designed to create a tokenized “diversity” to “support white domination so that they may establish and produce their own legitimacy as ‘good’ teaching bodies and ‘respectable’ Canadian citizens” (Schick, 119). To put this in more simple terms, white students know that the fakeness and ineffectiveness of diversity initiatives on campus maintain their white privilege sometimes just as powerfully as overt forms of discrimination do. If white students play along with the pantomime of tokenized diversity, they won’t have to challenge their own privilege or lose their own positioning.

Similarly, allegiance to a respectable form of ableist rhetoric—or ableist apologia—is required of faculty and students if they hope to access the privilege of the university themselves. If faculty and students can be seen

to just try to accommodate some of the time, to play along with the game of accessibility and inclusion, they know that their own intelligence, ways of learning, and embodiment can be kept safe from stigmatization, can be unaltered and unexamined. Students and teachers will show allegiance to exclusions that reinforce their privilege, and show allegiance to processes that maintain it. It is not just in assessment situations in the classroom in which teachers are asked to decide who gets to be included and who does not—this selection is folded into every aspect of university life. Ableism is not a series of bad or sad anomalies, a series of discrete actions. It is a rhetoric in the fullest sense of the word: gestural, social, architectural, duplicitous and plain, malleable, and immovable. And it requires agents. It requires actions and intentional inaction.

It seems as though, regardless of the architectural style(s) of a campus, steep steps are integral, whether these are the wide marble staircases of Greek-revival administration buildings and “approaches,” or the brutalist concrete stairs and terraces like those constructed on my own campus at the University of Waterloo. The most traditional of campuses, many of them built around churches, or in classical Ionic style, similarly rely on steps not just as architectural details but as symbolic social centerpieces of university life—traditional university life. For example, think of Amory Blaine in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise*. He develops a “deep and reverent devotion to the gray walls and Gothic peaks [of Princeton] and all they symbolized as warehouses of dead ages. . . . he liked knowing that Gothic architecture, with its upward trend, was peculiarly appropriate” to his elite university (62). This same upward trend builds stairs, as well as some peculiar attitudes about who can come within the walls, and who can ascend the heights, and who deserves to be on the upper steps. Unsurprisingly, when Disney/Pixar animators wanted to create a realistically forbidding setting for the film *Monsters University*, they studied several Ivy League schools: the MU School of Scaring has broad, high marble stairs just like those you’d find at Harvard or Stanford.¹ In reality, and in the public imagination, higher education is about steep steps. I will also return to the metaphorical message sent by the Monsters U. gates, themselves modeled after those on exclusive campuses like Berkeley and Harvard.

They are onto something. Using gates as ideological foci—or the main visual focus—of college architecture has traditionally ensured that we will view the university as set apart from society. Ironically, the same gates were built and used in other “total institutions” like asylums to forcibly keep the public out and the deviant in; college gates keep the public

out and the elite in. Further, the gates urge us to understand academia as a space to protect and as a space to be “secured.” This securing means that an African-American professor such as Ursula Ore, as Jennifer Doyle points out, can be subject to carding—a demand to “show her papers” or identification—on campus. When Ore refused this request, she was physically restrained, cuffed, straddled against a police car, and later charged with assault. This fear of interlopers is also what led to the repeated tasing of Mostafa Tobatabaiejad in a UCLA library in 2006. He was a student, in his library, studying—but was rendered suspect because of his ethnicity, and the situation escalated. In Canada, as Sandy Hudson points out, “It would be very difficult for you to find a university or college aged black person who hasn’t had some kind of experience with carding” on campus (Miranda, n.p.).² As Doyle reminds us, carding or “ID checks are all too common for black and brown students, faculty, and staff” (Doyle, 58). This securing also leads, as Morgan Holmes has shown, to “discipline” in the form of campus bans for students with mental illness or psychological disabilities. In Holmes’s words, there is “a trajectory toward removal of students who do not ‘fit in’ because they have a medical diagnosis” (n.p.). At the same time, schools fail to “protect students from their [sexual] assailants on campus. In other words, in a world where sexual assault is normal but “Asperger” is not, a rapist is not subject [to this trajectory towards removal] but a student with ASD is” (Holmes, n.p.). A student who has been a victim of rape can assume that their rapist will remain on campus and may need to do something as extraordinary as carrying a mattress around campus for a year in order to call attention to this—as Emma Sulkowicz did at Columbia University (access Mitra’s review of Sulkowicz). Yet a student of color can assume that an ordinary part of campus life will include university security questioning their right to be there in ways that call attention to their difference.

So, the ongoing policing of the inside and the outside of higher education ensures a state of campus (in)security that almost always plays itself out on a certain set of bodies. For instance, as Leila Whitley and Tiffany Page show in an article in the journal *New Formations*,

after 31 current and former University of California Berkeley students filed two federal complaints against the university alleging the mishandling of sexual assault investigations, a review of four California universities conducted by the California State Auditor found that in more than half of the cases reviewed the universities could not demonstrate that complainants were informed of investigation out-

comes. . . . institutional quiet becomes yet another means, among the institutional and legal frameworks . . . to enable sexism to remain out of sight, to conceal behaviour and to return the institution to a normalised state of affairs.” (n.p.)

In other words, as a newspaper article in the *Guardian* stated in its title: “In Academia, There Is No Such Thing as Winning a Sexual Harassment Complaint” (Postgraduate).

In a very separate and yet somehow similar scenario in this same California system, a campus police officer was caught pepper-spraying non-violent student protestors at UC Davis. It wasn’t enough that the police were dressed in riot gear, armed, and felt that pepper-spraying was the most effective way to deal with a student protest, but the university subsequently spent \$175,000 to “scrub” mentions of this incident from the Internet, to ensure that no one searching “UC Davis” would access this news.

With the university most interested in protecting itself and its reputation, in Jennifer Doyle’s words, “We swap out teaching for securitization—for the internalization within every student of [the] sense of being always-already-in-violation that defines the entire campus” and that particularly defines and is defined by legalistic logics such as accommodation (Doyle, 116). The campus is “a private zone that must be protected from the “non-affiliate,” from public invasion” (Doyle 44). The campus ostensibly gets walled-off to protect students. This also protects and prolongs and provides grounds for practices of surveillance and segmentation that would never be allowed in the “real world.” Further, the university hides ableism behind idealism. As Holmes argues, “We are damaging one kind of health in the name of a perniciously normative health, then, at all stages of what was meant to be a public good” (n.p.). Staying silent about harassment and rape, squashing negative press, these things are done to protect education and educators, who we assume to be good. But these moves put students in danger, constructing every student as a possible threat to the reputation of the school. This extends to the legalization of the accommodation process for disabled students—the student is seen as someone who must be prevented from suing the school, and this is in part already a liability. The gates, towers, and steep steps should make us understand how deeply these architectural investments imprint educational attitudes: who gets kept out, who and what gets held carefully within, and what conduct can be excused, which rights can be suspended, on campus?

Eugenic Mergers

As mentioned in my “approach,” another way to map the spaces of academia and disability would be to look at the ways land was parceled out in the United States in the early to mid-1800s. While land-grant universities were popping up in rural spaces, asylums were popping up in other, nearby rural settings—on old farms and abandoned land. Yet the two institutions were often tightly hinged or merged together. From within one privileged space, academics were deciding the fate of others in similar, yet somehow now pathological, other, and impure spaces. Or, as Zosha Stuckey has shown, you have huge institutions like the New York State Asylum for Idiots, “rhetorically” educating young people just down the road from Syracuse University. My own alma mater, Miami University of Ohio, is a school that traces its origins to 1809, and at first glance seems to have a strong tradition of creating academic subjects, not academic objects. Yet, as is the case with many, many North American universities, Miami shared land with an institution of connected, but inverse intentions—a sanitarium for the treatment of mental disorders. To understand the contemporary state of “campus security,” mentioned above, we have to connect to this longer history.

As Henry Howe wrote in 1888, “Oxford [Ohio, home of Miami University] is purely a college town: and its various institutions are each in localities with pleasant outlooks. Among them is a sanitarium, the ‘Oxford Retreat,’ a private institution for the treatment of nervous diseases and insanity. Through its ample grounds winds a little stream” (355). Beside the building were formal gardens, and in these gardens, in 1905, “the first [Miami University] Junior Prom was held . . . the couples strolling past a flock of stately peacocks on the autumn grounds” (Havighurst, 165). The flip side of this charming outward appearance was that the Retreat was a place of secure isolation; streams and peacocks and formally dressed undergrads promenading on the outside, patients locked inside. Dr. Cook, the owner of the Retreat, built an underground tunnel from his home to the building, to enable him to travel from building to building “without being seen by his patients” (Havighurst, 158). At the Retreat, Dr. Cook also performed lobotomies and shock treatments.

You may have also seen a recent news item about the University of Mississippi discovering a graveyard on land it was clearing to build a Medical Center. In clearing the land, they found over 1,000 unmarked graves, believed to be those of patients at the former Mississippi State Lunatic Asylum (access Jerry Mitchell). The shock registered in news sto-

ries seemed to be associated with the fact that this discovery would halt the construction, and there is definitely a little bit of drama invoked in articles about the discovery, mentioning the idea of “ghosts” and “haunting” and a “horror movie.” But nowhere is there any real outrage or horror about the fact that these graves were unmarked, that these patients weren’t deemed deserving of a proper burial, that these lives were so demeaned. You could look to nearly any major state university and find similar links. For instance, there is another controversy about unmarked graves (and nearly 100 bodies unaccounted for) at the former State Colony for the Feebleminded in Austin, Texas, just a mile away from the University of Texas. Again, the controversy seems to be more about the value of land (estimated to be worth \$25 million) adjacent to the university, and not about those who died.

These connections reveal, first of all, the steady pattern of setting up such sites of incarceration in close proximity to universities, where one group of humans could be held and studied by another. One can also recognize what the binary relationship has always been between universities and hospitals and asylums like these. What a statement to the future doctors who will be trained at this medical center in Mississippi, for instance. Their learning now literally unfolds upon an ignorance of the eugenic past. Perhaps the most perverse instantiation of the logic of the steep steps we might hope to find is revealed: we continue to actually build universities in service of and on top of the history of eugenics, lifting some bodies upwards toward privilege upon the footings of segregation and oppression.

Places like the Oxford Retreat were labs for the development of negative eugenics—the destruction of supposedly inferior “stock” through isolation and sterilization. Many children from large immigrant families were shipped to these institutions, in both Canada and the United States, and there was a radically disproportionate number of African Americans, Eastern Europeans, and lower-class children, all expendable according to eugenic thinking. Miami University and other colleges, on the other hand, might be seen as an arena for positive eugenics, the propagation of (supposedly) superior “stock.” As Charles Murray has shown, North American colleges and universities have been tremendously successful at sorting citizens, with the top 10 U.S. schools sucking up 20 percentage of the top group of students—based on standardized tests. This sorting then also leads to what he calls “cognitive homogamy: when individuals with similar cognitive ability have children” (61). What could be more eugenic than this? Yet we act like this is some sort of accident. It is not.

To this day Miami maintains the robust “Miami Merger” program, sending Valentine’s Day cards and promotional materials to every individual who met their spouse at Miami, boasting that “out of 151,967 living alums, 24,882 are married to each other, creating 12,441 “Miami Mergers.” That’s about 16.4 percent of Miami’s alumni population” (“News Briefs”).

My partner and I married while we were both graduate students at Miami. Thus, we weren’t actually Miami mergers, but for one year we were treated as such. In 2005, we were mailed a magnet distributed to couples on Valentine’s Day to promote the merger program. The magnet had a slightly blurry image of a white male and female couple kissing in an archway on campus. Over the image there was a poem printed: “Here’s a magnet you take apart, to become a picture frame and a heart. Display it with a photo inside. You’re a Miami Merger, show it with pride!” The words Miami and Merger were printed in larger, red letters, above and below this image and poem. Beside this was the above-mentioned photo frame, which could be clicked out of the magnet so that you could place your own “merger” photo inside. The magnet also said “Happy Valentine’s Day 2005” and, at the bottom, “from the Miami Alumni Association.”

There should be a visceral sense of disconnection between the poetry on the card and the eugenic segregation (and research) we have witnessed throughout history. The Miami Retreat and the Miami Merger represent two extremes: one group of people institutionalized out of the gene pool, one group coerced into the gene pool. Negative eugenics could not be more clearly set in contrast to positive eugenics. It is also impossible to disconnect the idea of the merger from the reality of rape culture on campuses—especially a campus where, in 2012, a flier was found listing the “top ten ways to get away with rape” (Jones).

A quick aside: I will discuss this rape culture on college campuses in greater depth later in the book, but for the purposes of this first chapter, all about steep steps and ivory towers, we should note the title of Bonnie Fisher, Leah Daigle, and Francis Cullen’s landmark book on the topic of campus rape: *Unsafe in the Ivory Tower: The Sexual Victimization of College Women*. In the book, they show that one-fifth to one-quarter of women at U.S schools will be victims of rape or attempted rape. In Canada, because of a lack of similar research, universities are expected to self-report. Upsettingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, this allows schools to drastically underreport or even hide the truth. Canadian schools would have us believe that “for 2014, the total number of alleged incidents

of sexual assault reported to campus authorities amounted to 1.85 per 10,000 students.” As the CBC (Canada’s national broadcaster) argues, this “is well below what many researchers believe is the case” (Ward). There is likewise little research into sexual assault against students with disabilities, though we know that 83 percent of disabled women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime, a shocking statistic. The only current study on campus prevalence, by Gwendolyn Francavillo into the experience of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, suggested that 48% of these students experienced unwanted sexual contact, at least double the rate of hearing students in the United States. In short, rape and sexual assault are themselves a force for disablement on college campuses. Students with disabilities are disproportionately impacted.

As an “alum” of Miami of Ohio, a school where, in my first year on campus, a cross was burned on a town lawn and a hateful e-mail was sent to LGBTQ2 students who listed their names in the campus paper on national coming-out day, I feel uncomfortable about the message sent by the picture of a white heterosexual couple embracing on the “merger” magnet (Nasty E-mail). The intention is not to attack Miami, which is certainly (and scarily) no different in its legacy than many other schools. But we need to locate a common and insistent theme in North American academia. There are many other “merger” programs like this one, and couples who met on campus are specific targets of fundraisers. At Loyola University Chicago, there are “Rambler Romances”; at American University in Washington, there is a “Sweethearts” program. As fundraising consultants point out, “If you have both partners in a relationship that graduated from the same university, you have a better chance of getting gifts and getting bigger gifts over time” (“Miami Mergers,” n.p.). These mergers, then, often take on an economic connotation: the best eugenic stock meets one another on campus, combines their worth, and then contributes back to the school, thus further shaping it in their image and with their dollars. As Elizabeth Duffy’s 1998 *Crafting a Class* showed, admissions policies are often focused on the potential of students to later become donors. It is a positive eugenic dream come true, especially in an era of real college mergers—when the have-not schools are literally forced to combine with one another to stay alive because of the public defunding of education, and the most affluent institutions continue to attract a tremendous amount of donated money, privately. More and more, they invest this money dubiously.³ What these economics show is that the steep steps have strong historical roots: they were created in part by the parceling out of land and the juxtaposition of spaces of higher

learning beside spaces of warehousing and experimentation. The steep steps also continue to grow steeper: privilege begets privilege. Finally: eugenics is alive, well, and hard at work at North American colleges and universities.

Building Disability

The argument I am making here is that, basically, academia exhibits and perpetuates a form of structural ableism. I borrow to a certain degree from the notion of structural racism, defined by the Aspen Institute as follows:

A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with “whiteness” and disadvantages associated with “color” to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist. (n.p.)

Likewise, ableism has to be seen as a series of entrenched structures—not just the action of an individual or of individuals. We have to understand that because of these pervasive structures, we live in a society that resists efforts to ameliorate or get rid of ableism. As scholar and activist Daniel Freeman writes, “Able-bodied people all have things that they fall short with, skills or tasks that they will never master. But when disabled folks say, ‘These are the things I need in order to do my very best,’ it is labeled as an ‘accommodation.’ . . . The language itself is ableist in nature, bringing into focus the reality of how disabled bodies are seen as barriers to able-bodied life” (n.p.). Accommodation is thought of as something that always needs to be created, something that has a cost. This underlines the inherent inaccessibility of nearly all of society: seemingly, nothing is ever designed to be accessible in the first place. Accessibility itself is an exnomination, a negative or inverse term, existentially second to inaccessibility. Accessibility is existentially second in a way that demands a body that cannot access. Nothing is inaccessible until the first body can’t access it, demands access to it, or is recognized as not having access. As the great philosopher of disability Tobin Siebers wrote, “when a disabled

body moves into any space, it discloses the social body implied by that space. There is a one-to-one correspondence between the dimensions of the built environment and its preferred social body—the body invited inside as opposed to those bodies not issued an invitation” (85). In this way, the structural ableism of society mandates not just that structures be built only for preferred bodies, but that this preferred status be borne out and proven by all of the bodies that are denied access. Having access, then, is not momentous for those who can easily move through these spaces. Being denied access—and pointing out this denial—creates a spectacle. Needing access is momentous.

But what does it mean, then, to suggest that disability is constructed? As I have written before, an emphasis on social construction can often defuse the political power of an identity group. Social constructionism, in some ways, can be used as a method of silencing. Particularly, social construction can remove the focus on the particularity of differences of bodies and minds—if we are all disabled by an oppressive environment or architecture or pedagogy in some way, why does the disability perspective really matter? How is the embodied experience of disability any different from the norm? The final effect can often be just as oppressive as the reality that social construction serves to critique. Without the solidarity and political unity that come with disability identity, it is very difficult to challenge the norm. But a cautious and rights-oriented social constructionist philosophy can interrogate or explore the ways that bodies and cultures, biology and social structures—even texts—interact and cocreate one another.

To explore this cautious interrogation, let’s look at one particular example: the ways that buildings, in the last three decades, have increasingly been understood as capable of making people sick.

Sick buildings were made possible by certain economic conditions: architects could create airtight and efficient buildings with open floor plans because of “conditions of relative privilege and luxury” (Murphy, 3). There was “an expectation of comfort and safety as conditions of daily life” and yet also “a sense that privilege was imperfect, even threatened”: the very conditions of privilege could be toxic (Murphy, 3). These airtight buildings also circulated toxins. The creation of “sick buildings” is an example of the ways that architecture can actually disable. As Michelle Murphy writes, “the making of office buildings, homes, and other seemingly innocuous places into sites where chemical exposures occurred or did not occur was among other things an effect of power, power than could only be exercised on uneven terrain” (178).

Murphy continues:

When the toxic effect of the vast majority of chemicals remained untested, when exposures themselves regularly escaped detection, people who believed their bodies were reacting to the background noise of everyday chemicals had very little secure knowledge from which to begin coping with their afflictions. . . . the struggle by ordinary people to understand their bodies and the consequential, sometimes deliberate, undermining of their effort resonates with a political, and not just poignant, valence. (178)

The phenomena of sick buildings became a drama of perceptibility and imperceptibility, a constant debate about “is it real or not?” (18). The drama or debate connects both directly and metaphorically to academic ableism. First of all, many universities contain sick buildings: a simple Google search turns up hundreds of examples of the spread of viruses because of poor ventilation, mold, and so on; as well as cases of exposure to dangerous chemicals both directly and acutely, and slowly, over time on campuses. But the power dynamics around the ways that college campuses make students sick are also similar in many ways to the power dynamics around how college campuses disable. For instance, while we think we know (and we argue, over and over again, that we know) what the benefits of an education are, what are its harms? Who can expose these harms? Why is this exposure so difficult? As Murphy argues, “The imperceptibility and uncertainty of such harms can be the tangible, and even purposeful, result of human action” in the case of sick buildings (180). That is, it is not just the sickness of the buildings that is a human product, it is also the very difficulty of exposing this sickness that is the result of intentional action.

We can say that illness and disability are constructed by these buildings, very literally. Yet who claims this construction matters, as does the fact that college processes are designed—yes, constructed—to deny claims of sickness and disability or to deny responsibility for them. What does it mean to suggest that disability is in part socially constructed? In one sense, it means that those who expose these realities might be blamed for them or disbelieved as the university secures itself.

There are other ways that universities create sickness, of course. A 2015 study at the University of California at Berkeley found that 47 percent of graduate students suffer from depression, following from a 2005 study that showed 10 percent had contemplated suicide (Fogg). A 2003

Australian study found that the rate of mental illness in academic staff was three to four times higher than in the general population (Winefield et al.). According to a *New Scientist* article, the percentage of academics with mental illness in the United Kingdom has been estimated at 53 percent (Wilcox). A study by Gail Kinman and Siobhan Wray also showed that “compared to other professionals and community samples, academic staff experience less job satisfaction and extremely low levels of psychological health” (492). In no other profession is this stress better camouflaged behind other, supposedly inviolable, and more important “values” like autonomy, flexibility, and creativity. The result is a sort of boutique stress: faculty and staff may willingly or unwittingly trade in their happiness and “balance.”

The social construction of disability on campus often mandates that disability exist only as a negative, private, individual failure. Very little real space is made for the building of coalitional, collective, or interdependent disability politics. Moreover, the university can never be viewed as the space responsible for causing disability. Disability had to exist prior to, has to remain external to, and has to be remedied according to the arm’s-length accommodations of a blameless and secure academic institution.

Sickness and Wellness

The “sickness” model of higher education also comes into conflict with the “wellness” model. As mentioned previously, we can draw a (sort of straight) line from eugenic mental hygiene and physical fitness tests, to their existence as promotional programs, to family life education programs, to wellness initiatives. Such programs currently offload the responsibility for “wellness” onto individual students (and teachers). Eat better. Exercise more. Sleep well. (Maybe even wear this complimentary watch to track all this.) The programs often synch with “mental health awareness” on campuses—those programs that often refuse to address mental illness as a systemic issue, as something caused by college, and definitely refuse to address mental disability. What these programs also do not attempt to do is attempt to address structural ableism and the educational construction of disability. They also tend to be placed where psychologists can gather large amounts of data from a captive population—which is why so many wellness programs are helmed by psychologists or run out of psychology departments. The euphemism

“wellness” also works rhetorically to demand that we do not discuss disability, especially mental illness/mental disability/madness. We now have a growing industry of professionals working to minimize and hide disability on campuses.⁴ But the idea of wellness has also had an invasive effect, working its way into all aspects of university life. The most recent evidence of this trend was a “wellness agreement” that a Canadian student had to sign. A Mount Saint Vincent University student was forced to sign an agreement “forbidding him to tell other students in residence that he was feeling suicidal” (Silva). The exact language from the agreement was that the student “will not discuss or engage in conversations with residence students regarding personal issues, namely the student’s self-destructive thoughts” (Silva). The penalty for breaking this contract would have been expulsion from residence.

Wellness programs, then, might be defined as contemporary “opportunity structures” for forms of eugenic thinking. An “opportunity structure” names the conditions or factors that might empower people to create social movements (and enable other changes). A university-wide program, harnessing the communications and PR power of the school, can be a particularly powerful, authoritative, legitimizing opportunity structure. In this case, the focus on wellness might provide the rhetorical conditions in which eugenic ideas about who is and is not “fit” for college can germinate and grow.

As Catherine Gidney’s book *Tending the Student Body* shows, “by the 1930s and ‘40s, many universities provided some type of health service, and required physical examination and physical training. . . . educators had come to perceive bodily health to be a crucial component in the role of the university in shaping students’ character. . . . In other words, character would become writ on the body” (15, 76). Gidney goes on to show that “anxieties about women’s ability to combine intense study with good health in general, and reproductive health in particular [was] prominent within Canadian universities” (16). And, “in the late nineteenth century, some American universities, particularly elite ones, instituted compulsory medical examinations as part of their admission process in order to eliminate the unfit” (23). Unsurprisingly, “in obtaining funding for health services, physicians and administrators also relied on the help of faculty whose research intersected with aspects of the student physical examinations. . . . Physicians and scientists, and even the occasional entrepreneur, quickly identified such programs as potential sources of captive research subjects. The provision of health services in the interests of students thus blurred with the use of students as research subjects” (32).

These programs are no longer explicitly mandatory, unless you are forced to sign an agreement. Yet physicians and scientists on your campus likely study student wellness and publish about wellness without ever asking for student consent. Further, all students at Oral Roberts University are required to wear Fitbit watches to track their weight, sleep, and exercise and many university employees can earn insurance discounts by submitting to wellness checks, using wellness apps, or wearing smart watches to track themselves. And “wellness” is a theme that pervades the university through awareness days, exercise-a-thons, special yoga classes, the use of university-wide health statistics by researchers, and so on. In the sickness model, we are unsure of exactly to what degree the university might be disabling, but the blame and the impact almost always falls on individuals to shoulder. In the wellness model, we are sure we should all be physically improving on campus, not talking about disability, and the burden is on the individual student to never be unwell.

So we have the impossible challenge of *Academic Ableism*: not just to recognize where and how ableism happens, but to ask what the impact will be of exposing it, what the cost might be of assigning blame, and what the forces are that make it imperceptible, what the euphemisms are that disguise it, and how it comes to be normalized, even valorized in academia.

What if higher education isn't creating knowledge and ability but instead is systematically disabling? Or, perhaps less stridently or controversially: What if higher education constructs both knowledge and disability? What if these constructions rely on one another? Finally, if disability is in part socially constructed by academia, how do we feature and highlight the constructions that make space for agency, community, solidarity, and resilience?

Climbing the Steep Steps

Of course, disabled people have been fighting against academic ableism for decades. The very first Disabled Students Program, run by students with disabilities to provide self-advocacy, began at the University of California at Berkeley in 1970. Reacting to the history of the forced institutionalization of people with disabilities, the first Center for Independent Living was also created at Berkeley in 1972. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was then passed in 1975, Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund offices were started in Berkeley and Washington,

DC, in 1979, and the Americans with Disabilities Act was finally passed in 1990. Throughout this time, boycotts, sit-ins, and civil disobedience became ways to draw attention to the educational barriers facing many people with disabilities. For instance, a group of protesters staged a very physical protest against the steep steps that kept disabled people disenfranchised within legal and political processes, by taking off their braces, getting out of their wheelchairs, putting down their crutches, and climbing the Capitol Steps in Washington.

The following image, of the March 1990 ADAPT protest calling for passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), shows the perspective of those crawling up the steps, the gravity of the metaphor, and the power of people's reaction to it.⁵ Here, observing a political protest enacted over a physical (and highly symbolic) space nicely articulates my point about the alloy of architecture and ideology, the union of bodies and discourses, and it shows how powerfully the disability community has always felt about the exclusiveness of steep steps.⁶

The image depicts a view from the bottom of the steps, looking up to the Capitol Building. The steps seem very steep. We view two individuals, one crawling forward up the stairs, with his or her back to us. The other individual, a young black woman in the foreground, seems to be moving up the steps backward, one step at a time. Her torso is facing us, but her head is turned around in the other direction, looking up the steps. There is a photographer further up the steps taking a picture as well.

The disabled students' movement at schools like Berkeley in the 1970s was both part of a large ideological shift, as it was also part of a huge demographic shift—there were new immigrant groups entering college, as well as many veterans of the Vietnam War, and many veterans of the political action against this war. These people now turned some attention to the class war that American universities had been complicit in, and argued that higher education should be a civil right (access Joseph Shapiro's *No Pity*).

The central tenets of the disability rights movement have been pride in disability identity, collective self-representation, and a concentrated effort to remove barriers to access, perhaps most remarkably those barriers that have kept people with disabilities out of social institutions like universities. Central to this history has been the idea that disability is created by a social, physical, and educational environment shaped in ways that exclude. Eugenics works to strongly ground inferences about social worth in biological formulae, using science to suggest that differences between people are predetermined, genetic, and immutable. But



Fig. 2. Tom Olin, “Day in Court for Americans with Disabilities Protests Planned over Supreme Court’s ADA Rulings.” March 1990. Reprinted with permission.

what if, instead of the idea that nature determines individual success, we saw the world as inequitably shaped and built, and believed instead that the reform of society and culture would allow for a more equitable world? The social model of disability has been central to the struggle for disability rights, drawing attention to the oppression of people with disabilities. This model posits that disability is purely social, an oppression stacked onto people on top of their impairments, which are real. That said, this was largely a materialist movement, and suggests a clear bifurcation. The view was, as Michael Oliver wrote, “disablement is nothing to do with the body, impairment is nothing less than a description of the body” (34).⁷ This view, applied to education, follows the hopeful model of “universal education”—believing that, given access, anyone can learn and, more broadly, suggesting that the university is the place to elevate society based on the education of all of its citizens, rather than a place to sort society based on the education of the privileged few.

In the wake of the disability rights movement, the public began to understand disability as something that is at least partially a product of the inaccessible structure of attitudes and institutions. It follows that, when we can address the cultural oppression of people with disabilities, and when we can change the way our institutions are structured and operate, we can positively affect the lives of people with disabilities (and all people, as we will all become disabled at some point in our lives).

Creating Steep Steps

Unfortunately, following the ADA, and a fairly large public backlash against this act, access for people with disabilities is no longer seen primarily as a civil rights issue.⁸ Access is constructed as a matter of compliance, as the dominant terminology of the ADA is the idea of “reasonable accommodation.” The “reason” of the medical and legal establishment, then, finally decides upon which accommodations are to be made—and this is reproduced at the university, where the student with disabilities must catalogue their deficits, and then is granted access through a finite range of legally and institutionally sanctioned accommodations, doled out carefully by professors and instructors under pressure and circumscription of the law. The dynamic, then, forgets the eugenic history in which those in power within the university controlled the lives of people with disabilities, positioning themselves as the arbiters of ability.⁹ The dynamic also asks us to continue to favor the educational philosophy

that the university is a place to sort society based on the education of the “deserving” few, rather than as the place to elevate society based on the education of all of its citizens.

Making disability seem inimical to or out of place at the university has been a strategy used to shore up the identity of those invested in higher education: if those who do not “qualify” can be vilified, marked out, and kept away, then those who make it up the stairs must deserve to. In this way, the university disavows disability—the steep steps create an environment in which disability cannot be validated or recognized, in which students with disabilities must fall to the bottom. The fall or the sorting occurs because, over time, those invested in higher education have refused to believe that the body traversing the steps could be disabled, that the elite mind could be imperfect. At the same time, their legitimate fears, perhaps grown from the realization of their own weaknesses, their own vulnerability, led to the creation of disability as a kind of counter-image. Of course, the reality is that disability is always present—there is no perfect body or mind. There is no normal body or mind. In North America, one-fifth of the population is disabled. We live in an age when, despite physical/medical efforts to avoid it and psychological/medical efforts to disavow and pathologize it, we will all become disabled at some point in our lives. I’ll repeat this, asking you to remove any of the dread that might be programmed into the phrase, culturally: we will all become disabled at some point in our lives. Disavowing disability is in no body’s best interest.

Teachers recognize the diversity of the students they teach. But teachers must also recognize their roles within institutions, disciplines, and perhaps even personal pedagogical agendas, in which they may seek to avoid and disavow the very idea of disability—to give it no place. This avoidance and disavowal brings with it its own spatial metaphors—I use the steep steps to express this negative force. That these steps are real in the lives of people with disabilities adds to the power of the metaphor. The steps have a strong connotation in the disability community, and not just for people who use wheelchairs and crutches. When I say that the academy builds steep steps, I hope that this verb entails many things—most of all, I want to show that the steep steps are constructed for a reason. As I have already shown, not only did eugenics actually reshape the North American population through things like immigration restriction, not only did it reshape families through its campaigns for “better breeding,” not only did it reshape bodies through medical reinvention, but it reshaped how North Americans thought about bodies and minds.

Here, for example, is a diagram of the steps that were created to distinguish between different grades of the “feeble-minded” in the United States in the heyday of the eugenics movement before the Second World War. The definitions were used to classify a group of humans according to mental age, suggesting that development had been arrested and would proceed no further past the step at which the individual was placed. The mental age was determined based upon variations of a standard test, the Binet test, which asked literally hundreds of standard common-knowledge questions, of increasing difficulty. The test was also designed to stop the subject once they had reached the stage or step of difficulty at which they could proceed no further.

This image shows five people, each stationed on one of five very steep steps. The bottom person, slouched on the ground, is labeled an “idiot, mentally 3 yrs. old.” On the next step up, an individual is hunched over, looking downwards, labeled “low-grade imbecile, 4 to 5 yrs. old.” Next step up, a “medium imbecile, mentally 6 to 8 yrs. old.” Then a “high grade imbecile, mentally 8 to 10 yrs. Old” is pictured on the next step up, now gazing upwards. Finally, we view a person, described in the caption as a “moron, mentally 10 to 12 years old,” attempting to climb above the final and topmost step but only getting halfway up.

As the image reveals, the steps were also closely associated with forms of work, and thus classed citizens and linked their value to this labor-output, but also placed almost all of the feebleminded below reason and judgment, not only in a space of rational vacuity, but deficit. You’ll also notice that the bodily bearing of these individuals conveys a message: the different levels of animation suggest physical and cognitive correlation. These people look tired. The disabled mind equates with the disabled body. These states correspond with affects: the slumped shoulders and downcast eyes suggest or physicalize depression.

If these steps in the image on the next page represent the very bottom of the steep set we climb to the ivory tower, they nonetheless cannot be disconnected from the history of North American higher education. In fact, “morons,” “imbeciles,” and “idiots” were both rhetorically (and eugenically) constructed by the “fathers” of higher education, and those individuals who were given these labels were also studied and researched.¹⁰ At the top of the steps were those who taught and studied at premier universities, and these people studied and experimented upon the bodies of those on the bottom steps.

We may like to believe that, today, practices of eugenics have not only been rejected but that they’ve also been corrected. Yet the selectivity of

EXHIBIT OF WORK AND EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR JUVENILE MENTAL DEFECTIVES

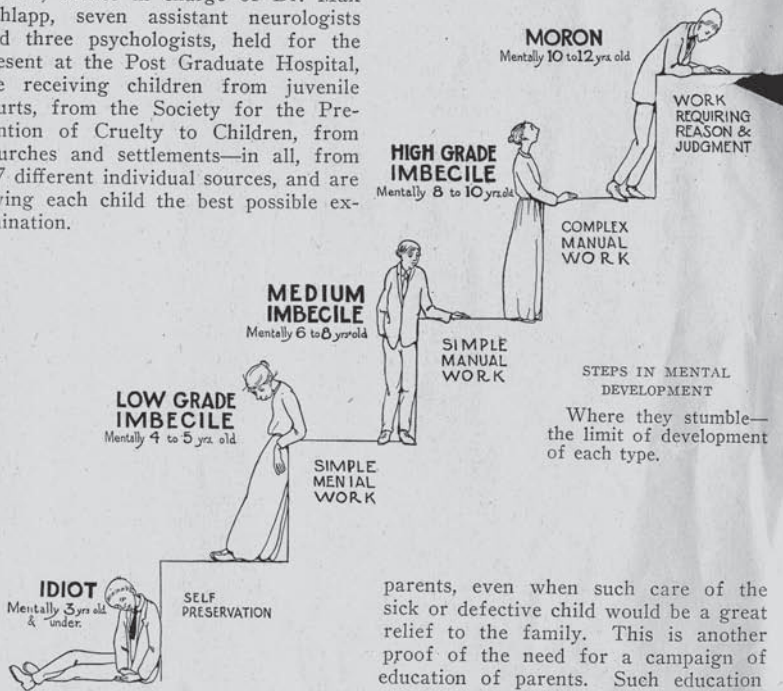
Between October 7 and 13, moving pictures at the Metropolitan Insurance Building will show the work for mentally defective children which the New York Department of Public Charities has undertaken through its clearing house for mental defectives. Started as an experiment the first of January, 1913, this clearing house has already proved its worth in meeting an actual need. Hitherto there has been no place where the mental condition of child or adult could be determined by scientifically trained experts and officially recorded for future reference and comparison.

Now, clinics in charge of Dr. Max Schlapp, seven assistant neurologists and three psychologists, held for the present at the Post Graduate Hospital, are receiving children from juvenile courts, from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, from churches and settlements—in all, from 147 different individual sources, and are giving each child the best possible examination.

Binet tests. Reports are then sent to the organization from which the child came together with recommendations for treatment.

About 2800 such examinations have been made. The results are recorded by stenographers present at the clinic. These records are, of course, confidential and will be open for study only to accredited investigators. The facts will be confirmed by each child's finger print, to aid in any future identification and comparison of data.

Strange to say, strong opposition to institutional treatment comes often from



The child's family history is sought, his antecedents and the influence surrounding his first years; any physical defects, such as defective teeth, adenoids, eye or ear trouble are noted and an examination made of personal tendencies and mental efficiency by the

parents, even when such care of the sick or defective child would be a great relief to the family. This is another proof of the need for a campaign of education of parents. Such education will be advanced in part by the nurses who visit the homes in an attempt to ensure the treatment recommended. It is hoped that the suitability and resources of Randall's Island as a place of retreat for children needing skilled care, may be increased and developed by adequate appropriation of funds.

Fig. 3. "Exhibit of Work and Educational Campaign for Juvenile Mental Defectives." American Philosophical Society, 1906.

this environment must be continually interrogated or questioned. We must all evaluate the ways in which we ourselves continue to decide which bodies and which minds will have access to the considerable resources, privileges, and advantages we have and we bestow—and as we ask this question, we must wonder whether what we have to offer is truly worthwhile if it translates into policies of exclusion, programs of incarceration, and reductive definitions of human worth.

Interrogating the steep steps metaphor works to highlight not just how space and spatialization are exclusionary but also the ways that the distance between a hypothetical “us” and a “them,” perhaps the able and the disabled, has a particular structure. Yet we must look at the steps from other angles, along other axes.

What are the attitudes, requirements, and practices that might represent boundaries, jumps on the graph, risers on the steps? Are there chutes, or are there ladders, set up to speed movement from top to bottom or bottom to top? What forces move up and down, affecting students’ progress? Should we even want to get to the top? How do students go back down the steps or out of the university gates and back to home communities? What makes this journey possible or impossible? What does it mean to skip the steps? Where do the steps actually start?

How might we chart the steps of our own ascendance or decline (perhaps on a 2-dimensional picture or a graph)? Can we recognize perspectives from the bottom? Can we be both at the top step and at the bottom step—do we straddle steps as we climb or fall? Does the perspective of teachers, having in some way climbed above the students in their classes, change the view of the steps? What aspects of higher education’s labor practices (or investments) serve to solidify these steps? What is it like to be a graduate student teacher on this map, moving from one position to another, or what it is like to be an adjunct professor?

Finally, if we want to circumvent the climb, find another way in aside from the steps, how do we build a ramp?

In the next chapter, I will begin to address this question.

