

Roanne Kantor // Earlier this month, I handed in the grades for my course on narratives of disability from around the world. At the same time I was teaching a graduate class about the interdisciplinary endeavor and its dependence on metaphor. The way that the same words have slippery and differing meanings depending on disciplinary and social context: the way we can think we're communicating, when really we're not. This is, of course, a perennial hobby-horse with me, the subject of my nascent second book. Metaphors are dangerously unruly. Indeed, a major stream of literary criticism around disability focuses on managing disability's slippery metaphoricity—Mitchell and Snyder and Ato Quayson come immediately to mind. Yet, as scholars like Michele Friedner and Lawrence Ralph continue to remind us, real disabled people don't always use the words or think the thoughts set out for them by scholarship.

So this gets me thinking about the problem of institutionalization. We tend to begin our narration of disability studies as beginning with the struggle for deinstitutionalization. And yet, as we now well know, the move to deinstitutionalize was not met with an equivalent set of supports in another sphere. The politically righteous move away from the forced warehousing of disabled people offered cover, in effect, for the withdrawal of large-scale support as such. This is a point made for my undergraduates by Tom Shakespeare and for my graduate students by João Biehl.

Something similar has happened with literary study (indeed, the humanities writ large) within larger university systems. Or, at least, slippery metaphoricity of the word "institution" allows me to say so. Critiques from my home field, postcolonial studies, as well as its allies in Ethnic American Literature, were at the forefront of the dismantling of institutionalized Eurocentrism in the form of "western-civ" or "great books" general education requirements. This work was urgent and politically necessary. But I think our predecessors probably envisioned that such a deinstitutionalization would give way to a new, better order of requirements. It hasn't. Instead, for the most part, universities have taken the absence of these once necessary classes in stride. Student's too. As I described in my post on the institutional position of the medical humanities, our students are happy to take our classes that fulfill the common med-school "English" requirement. They tend to like them. But they simultaneously understand literature and its study as exceptionally peripheral to the process of their education.

The use of the word "institution" to describe both of these contexts conceals an important unevenness in their application—that's basically standard for interdisciplinary gestures. There may even be violence in suggesting a parallel between these two types of deinstitutionalization whose consequences are so unequal. But metaphor seduces us anyway—the infinitely appealing

happenstance of a shared language, the thought work of a multiply resonant utterance, and the way it might allow us to see things newly.

I am thinking a lot about institutionalization recently as a way of wrestling with unevenness between the fields where I work. As you all know by now, my primary field of training was comparative literature, in several language traditions of the Global South. In my professional life post graduation, I have tended to be recognized by the Anglophone-dominated scholarly field of postcolonial studies. “Institutionalization” has always been a topic for postcolonial scholarship. This has taken a few different forms. The first, as I noted above, was the critique of already-institutionalized “canonical” literatures as a way of making space for literature in other subject positions and from parts of the world. But as that first project gained ground, there was a backlash against the imbrication of the field itself with logics of higher education, the production of “approved” versions of alterity, etc. The end-point of such critiques was almost always a call for various forms of deinstitutionalization.

I find myself in an odd position here, for two reasons. First and more basically, the romance of “deinstitutionalization” is easily espoused by post-tenure scholars. It means something different for those of us who have only just gotten our first tenuous toehold on employment. Second, this April, I gave a talk in which I endeavored to show how a broad-based idea of “the institution” as a uniform, self-aware and self-regulating entity can conceal the uneven, sometimes resistant, sometimes simply distinct energies of *an* institution operating in a particular place and time and made up, in the end, of individual scholars. Institutions endure, and that should be attended to, but they do not endure uniformly or unchallenged.

This anti-institutionalist attitude within postcolonial studies is also very much at odds with my experience working in Disability Studies. While the field is well established and growing all the time, the number of scholars working on the Global South is still shockingly low. This is true despite the fact that the Euro-American experience of disability is by far the minority on a global scale (c.f. Gretch and Soldatic, Friedner). And even now, most engagements with disability in the Global South are social scientific. The number of scholars working on *literary* or more generally *creative* production about disability in the Global South is vanishingly small.

The particularity of the institution matters here. Disability’s institutional presence is well established at a few schools where scholars and activists have made it a priority. But where I work, the scholarly field of disability is still in its infancy. This quarter, my students have participated in protests to establish a disability community center on campus, as well as efforts to establish a permanent disciplinary home for disability studies, a consistently-offered introductory course, and a pathway toward an eventual minor. This spring, a cross-disciplinary group of Stanford students will host the first Stanford disability studies graduate conference. If the collective effect of these efforts isn’t institutionalization, what is?

I had the surreal of experience of seeing my own face included in powerpoint presentation by the Office of Accessible Education as part of a very small cohort of professors who “work on disability at

Stanford.” I teach *one* course. I write about disability for this blog—*sometimes*. My first scholarly piece on disability studies still lurks unfinished somewhere in my google docs! What kinds of qualifications are those?!? But students come to me now, in ones, in twos, asking for guidance about thesis and directed readings and summer projects. Now, for the first time, my course on disability enrolled a large proportion of students who self-identify as disabled. In the Spring I will guest lecture about South Asian films representing disabling gendered violence in a course on “Intersectional Global Health.” Next year I will co-teach the official “Intro to Disability Studies” course. I am the slim end of this institutional wedge.

How funny it feels to be working at the intersection of two fields between which there is seemingly no consensus on what it means to be “institutionalized.” And yet, here I am.