

Modernity's Disqualifiers: Disability Aesthetics, Enfreakment, and the 20th Century American South

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This summer, I embarked on a project with a broad goal of relating Southern literature to disability theory. In this process, I have gained what I believe to be many meaningful insights into how disability functioned in the 20th Century American South. Indeed, when any scholar launches a project with disability as one of its main ideas, they are forced to define their terms rather carefully. This, in turn, would give me an idea of what to search for when I looked into the primary literature of the time. After a deep dive into disability theory, I discovered that the definition that made both the most logical and appealed to me the most (as will be explained at length in the final project) was an explanation of disability wherein a so-called "normal" person is made to feel aesthetically uncomfortable or displeased by a disabled person. Using and building on the work of legendary scholar Tobin Siebers, who claims that aesthetics is what we think in the presence of others and thus seek to recreate because of that reading, I plan to argue that there exists a close relationship between the 'enfreakment' of traditional freaks in shows and literature, and perhaps more coded freaks as well, and interrogate what that means for the identity of disability.

For the focus on Southern Literature, I read books by Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor, Welty, and many more. I also look at pictures of freak shows that were put on in the South in relation to primary documents from court cases of Eugenic sterilization cases, in seeing what enforcement mechanisms an aesthetic of normality has. In all, it has been an enlightening summer and I look forward to continuing my research over the course of the school year!