

## Call for Papers:

### **Being (In)Visible: Representations of Disability and Ableism in Popular Culture**

**January 2025**

**Deadline for submissions: September 15, 2024**

Student Conference

January 16-17, 2025

Obama Institute, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz

People living with disabilities have been largely overlooked and discriminated against in most parts of the world. In America, through legislation like the so called “ugly laws,” disabled people were ostracized and excluded from public life until 1974. To this day, the general public often lacks knowledge and understanding about disabled people and the realities of their lives. Though, according to the *WHO*, “[a]n estimated 1.3 billion people – about 16% of the global population – currently experience significant disability,” most people are not consciously exposed to disabilities in their day-to-day lives.

The academic field of Disability Studies has its roots in the 1980s. As early as 1999, Lennard J. Davis advocated for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to disability in his article “Crips Strike Back: The Rise of Disability Studies.” In recent years, this approach has been increasingly implemented in academia. Accordingly, the focus of the conference is the representation of people with disabilities in popular culture and media in a transnational American context. The transnational American context presents to be fruitful due to the global influence the United States holds in terms of cultural production. Be it via Hollywood, streaming services, media, or pop culture in general, the U.S. sets the trends and/or standards in most entertainment industries. This conference aims to broaden the scope of academic research dealing with interdisciplinary disability studies and tries to aid in highlighting inclusive and realistic representations of disabled people, as well as discussing how popular culture contributes to the (in)visibility of people with disabilities and creates cultural imaginaries.

Ginsburg and Rapp state that “[d]isability is a profoundly relational category, always already created as a distinction from cultural ideas of normality, shaped by social conditions that exclude full participation in society of those considered atypical” (54). Through this exclusion, people with disabilities are marginalized (and overlooked) in different areas of society. Characters with mental and/or physical disabilities are increasingly part of mainstream popular

culture such as in TV shows, movies, novels, among others. This trend is transnational and can, for example, be observed in shows like *Game of Thrones*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and *Head Full of Honey*. We are interested in discussing how these characters are portrayed - whether the portrayal is biased, flawed, or even discriminatory.

We invite academic papers from graduate and non-graduate students of all academic fields that discuss the representation of disabilities and the influence of ableism in popular culture. The paper should focus on and explore affected persons in film, literature, music, video games, or other media. Interdisciplinary approaches, both theoretical and practical, are welcome and encouraged.

**Suggested topics and works include (but are not limited to):**

- Disability and Race (Representation, Stereotypes and Biases)
- Disability and Gender, Sexuality / Sexual and Reproductive Rights (e.g.: *Sex Education*)
- Ableism and Infantilization in Popular Media
- Disability in TV-Shows, Movies and Children's Entertainment (e.g.: *The Big Bang Theory*, *Love on the Spectrum*, *Split*)
- Disability and Ableism in Religious Spaces
- Disability and Ableism in the Fantasy Genre (e.g.: *Narnia*, *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Game of Thrones*)
- The Representation and Portrayal of Different Types of Disabilities (Congenital or Stemming from Injuries/Accidents, 'Visible' or 'Invisible')
- Neurodiversity and Gender-Biased Exceptionalism in TV-Show Characters (e.g.: *Atypical*, *The Good Doctor*, *Ally McBeal*, *Monk*)
- Disability and Activism on Social Media
- Ableism and Self-Determination in Contemporary America (e.g.: Laws and Restrictions, Healthcare Access, Accommodations, etc.)
- Disability and Ableism in Video Games (*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, *Mass Effect*, *Life is Strange*)

Abstracts of no more than **300 words** should be submitted along with a 100-word biography to [disabilities.studentconference@gmail.com](mailto:disabilities.studentconference@gmail.com) by **15 September 2024**. Selected participants can expect to be notified by the end of September 2024. For further information or questions please contact Ayishat Aluko (she/her) at [aaluko@students.uni-mainz.de](mailto:aaluko@students.uni-mainz.de).

This Student Conference will be organized at the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies in Mainz and is funded by the Gutenberg Lehrkolleg (GLK). The conference will be held over the course of two days (16-17<sup>th</sup> of January) and will feature several presentations of about 20 minutes. Financial aid for presenters is available. For further information, please contact us via [disabilities.studentconference@gmail.com](mailto:disabilities.studentconference@gmail.com).

### **Bibliography**

- Davis, Lennard J. "Crips Strike Back: The Rise of Disability Studies." *American Literary History*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1999, pp. 500–12. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/490130>.
- Ginsburg, Faye, and Rayna Rapp. "Disability Worlds." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 42, 2013, pp. 53–68. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43049290>.