ABSTRACTS

CONFERENCE: Experiences of Dis/ability from the Late Middle Ages to the Mid-Twentieth Century

21 – 23 August 2019, Tampere University, Finland

Conference website with abstracts and more information: https://events.uta.fi/disabilityexperience2019/

KEYNOTES

Keynote I: David Lederer: 'Miracle Books as Sources of Early Modern Experiences of Disabilities'.

Associate Professor at Maynooth University (Republic of Ireland), Lederer has authored over 30 articles on demonic possession, suicide, psychiatry, popular culture and the emotions. He recently edited a collection on German History in Global and Transnational Context (Palgrave, 2017) and, with colleagues Maria Teresa Brancaccio and Eric J. Engstrom, co-edited a special issue of the Journal of Social History (The Politics of Suicide: Historical Perspectives on Suicidology before Durkheim, 2013). His Madness, Religion and the State in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, 2006) received the Gerald Strauss prize for best book on Reformation history. Currently, he is contracted for a global history of suicide by Reaktion Press. Extensive scholarly experiences in Australia, China, the United States and Europe include engagement on the 2008 ‘Fear in History’ cycle at the Davis Center (Princeton University) and a 2015-2017 secondment by the European Commission to the Wellcome Trust and ARC History of Emotion Centres at Queen Mary’s University of London and the University of Adelaide respectively to examine emotional welfare. For his home page, see: https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/people/david-lederer
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Keynote II: Donna Trembinski: Disability, Trauma and Conversion in the Lives of Early Franciscan Saints

Donna Trembinski is an Associate Professor of Medieval History at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia Canada. Her research interests lie in the intersection of disability, medicine and religion in the thirteenth century and on the usefulness of trauma theory in historical analysis. She has published articles in Franciscan Studies, Florilegium, the Journal of Ecclesiastical History, the Journal of the History of Psychology and the Journal of the Canadian Historical Association. She has also written essays included in edited collections published by Brill including Medicine and Law in the Middle Ages (2014) and Medieval Trauma (2018). Her monograph on the disabilities of Francis of Assisi entitled Illness and Authority: Ability and Disability in the Life of St. Francis of Assisi is forthcoming in 2020 with University of Toronto Press
and she is currently writing (with J. Holler and R. Semple) another book entitled *A History of Global Christianities* also under contract with University of Toronto Press.

More information on the details of these publications can be found at [http://sites.stfx.ca/history/donna_trembinski](http://sites.stfx.ca/history/donna_trembinski)

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**Keynote III: David Turner: Disability and Political Activism in the British Industrial Revolution**

David Turner is Professor and Head of History at Swansea University (UK). His publications include *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England: Imagining Physical Impairment* (Routledge, 2012), which won the Disability History Association Outstanding Publication prize. Between 2014 and 2016 he was Principal Investigator on a Wellcome Trust Programme Award in Medical History, 'Disability and Industrial Society: A Comparative Cultural History of British Coalfields, 1780-1948', which led to his most recent book, *Disability in the Industrial Revolution: Physical Impairment in British Coalmining 1780-1880* (Manchester University Press, 2018), co-authored with Daniel Blackie. He is committed to working with disability organisations, museums, the media and artists to widen the audience for disability history, and was historical adviser on the BBC Radio 4 series, 'Disability: A New History' (2013).

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**ABSTRACTS of presentations (in alphabetical order by last name)**

**Ahlin-Sundman, Elin: The Perfect Body: A Case Study of Clerical Masculinities and Male Bodies in Late Medieval Iceland**

The male body could be regarded as an important asset in performing masculinity. What type of body – appearances, abilities and skills – that is most valued, and perceived as masculine, varies depending on the context. In medieval clerical masculinities, the chaste and controlled body was idealized. Furthermore, to become ordained it was required to have a complete and undamaged body. Those who did not live up to these high standards could, however, supplicate for dispensation at the Apostolic Penitentiary. There are supplications from the Nordic counties regarding for example impaired vision and injured fingers. An important prerequisite for dispensation was that the impairment posed no obstacle to performing service, and did not cause public scandal. In this study, the skeletal remains of medieval canons, buried at the Augustinian monastery Skriðuklaustur, Iceland, are examined. The aim is to relate actual bodies to the ideal of bodily perfection. The focus is on oral health, and the impact of tooth loss on appearance and on abilities required to follow the daily routines at the monastery, and performing clerical masculinity.
Ball, Corinne: Fringe dwellers – Experiences of Disability at South Australia’s Destitute Asylum

The Destitute Asylum, situated on government land just outside the ‘square mile’ of central Adelaide, was an operational care institution for nearly 70 years between the 1850s and 1918. Housing the elderly, infirm, and destitute, as well as unmarried or abandoned pregnant women, the Asylum was the colonial government’s response to an increasing problem of poverty, illness and unemployment among migrants to South Australia. It was at the heart of a system that classified and controlled those who did not (or could not) conform to accepted standards of health, morality or industry. With social welfare thus managed by colonial authorities, rather than churches or charities, this system was unique in nineteenth century Australia.

This paper proposes a new reading of the Destitute Asylum records, and investigates how disability was constructed, experienced, and managed at the institution. Rereading the Asylum’s Registers through the lens of critical disability studies enables a new articulation of the complex relations between the various imaginary bodies that haunted the Destitute Asylum, and which still exert pressure today. Stories emerge that highlight the experiences of residents with disability during this period, how they were seen, and sometimes even how they saw themselves.

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Beck, Catherine: Unserviceable, Being Insane: Mental Disability and Difference in the Eighteenth-Century British Navy

Mental disorder was an accepted part of life at sea in the eighteenth century. Sailors were exposed to many of the accepted causes of madness or mental impairment, such as sunstroke, exhaustion, drunkenness and head-injuries. Understandings of ‘temporary insanity’ seem to have underpinned the British navy’s practical approach to the treatment of seamen, marines and officers incapacitated by mania, insanity, melancholy and idiocy. Men were treated in hospitals or sick quarters in Britain and in stations overseas, and many returned to their ships once their symptoms improved, or to less active service like harbour duty. Those who were considered in greater need of care were housed in the London asylums of Hoxton and Bethlem where, unlike Greenwich Pensioners, the primary goal was to affect a cure and return them to service. Many sailors were also cared for by their messmates at sea for years, as long as they could perform their duty and avoid disrupting the normal running of the ship. However, many others were also judged to be ‘unfit’ or ‘unserviceable’ and discharged from the navy entirely. This paper explores the parameters of mental impairment in the British navy to understand experiences of mental disability outside the eighteenth-century asylum.
Belt, Rabia: Disabling Democracy in America: Disability, Citizenship, Suffrage and the Law, 1819–1920

Nearly 40 states in the United States of America disfranchise people who are mentally impaired. Despite these widespread provisions against suffrage for members of one of our country’s largest minority groups, very little academic work has been done on how and why these restrictions were implemented and enforced. This paper will examine how and why people with mental disabilities were disenfranchised in the United States. Through a fine-grained analysis of constitutional and legislative debates, court cases, trade documents, newspapers, and petitions, I will describe what I call a “common sense” disability model that was used to bar people with alleged disabilities from the franchise. I will consider how and why state legislators barred suffrage for reasons of mental incapacity in their statutes and constitutions during the nineteenth century. I will then examine the subsequent court challenges involving people alleged to have voted when they lacked the required mental capacity. Finally, I will conclude by briefly gesturing towards the changed landscape of the twentieth century, when statutory provisions such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Voting Rights Act, and political movements such as the disability rights movement, successfully challenged a range of voting exclusions, from the disempowered to the disabled, yet left voting bans for people with mental disabilities unchanged. Why, I will ask, have these groups successfully petitioned for their inclusion in political life while mental competency laws remain on the books and continue to be applied in practice?

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Bergsdóttir, Arndís: Mining for Dis/abled Lives in Museum Archives and Coming up with Unruly Matters of Absence

This paper is about absence. It argues that the absences that seem to dominate the outcomes of museum mining need to be approached as matters – unruly matters – that are significant to the historical narratives of dis-/abled bodies and lives. The paper offers an approach to absence as matters that matter. It describes mining Icelandic museum archives for objects that matter in the lives of dis-/abled bodies have yielded a disproportionate number of artifacts. And how the
objects encountered seem riddled with misrepresentations where lived lives and experiences are rendered absent within realms that foreground spectacles, pathologies and the normalization of abled bodies. What is at stake are not only displacements from public historical narratives, but the subtle absences brought about by stereotypical depictions. Here, fixed images create a narrow lense that promises perfect vision, yet removes valuable aspects of lived lives and experiences. This paper draws on the relational aspects of new materialist approaches and offers insight into absence as relevant matters of heritage that come to matter through complex webs of relationships. Thus, absences do not call for presences, for absences are not hollow nothings – but they do need to be recognized and trusted.

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Blackie, Daniel: What counts as ‘experience’ in disability history?

Documenting the lived experiences of ‘disabled’ people in the past is a key goal of disability history. Yet, despite the importance of ‘experience’ to the field and the frequent appearance of the term in the disability histories we write, few disability historians (myself included) have bothered to explicate how they define or use the concept in their work. Taking Joan Scott’s observation that ‘[w]hat counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward’ as a starting point, this presentation attempts to unravel my understanding of the concept by looking at how I have approached the topic of experience in my own historical research on disability. In doing so, I hope to encourage other disability historians to consider their use of ‘experience’ as a category of analysis and the implications this has for the knowledge about disability they produce.

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Booth, Stan: Richard Steele: A Life Well Lived

Richard Steele is better known as the other half of Joseph Addison with whom he founded the eighteenth century newspapers The Tatler and The Spectator. Though the trials and tribulations of his life are generally documented, little is actually known about his health which ultimately led to his retirement in Carmarthen in Wales. Being far from the hustle and bustle of London which in comparison to Carmarthan would have been a complete change from the vicissitudes he would have been used to. The question that arises is was this new pace of life was more suitable to his having succumbed to gout which would have made moving in his environment more challenging? Horace Walpole is noted for his continual complaining about the pain of gout which eventually
confined him to Strawberry Hill. In this paper I will expand further on my previous research which explored Steele’s daily routine in Carmarthen with what would have been the complexities of his former productive life in London.

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Cojocaru, Oana Maria: Disabled Children and their (In)visible Experiences in Byzantium

Many healing narratives have come down to us through Byzantine hagiographies and miracle collections. Byzantine saints were known as being empowered with the capacity of healing medical conditions serious enough to be considered by the physicians as fatal. Throughout the centuries, healing accounts played an important role in promoting the saints’ cult, but they also highlight the significance of the therapeutic function performed by the saints within the Byzantine society. The miracles recorded by hagiographers were intended to be read out as trustworthy tales, and many such narratives include vivid details about the afflicted people who sought a healing for acute or chronic illnesses from living saints or holy shrines: names, age, place of origins, profession, and social status, description of their malady and the curative methods. Yet, children appear less often than adults, and many times hagiographers limited themselves to only mention their medical condition and how children were healed by the saints. Hints on how these children may have experienced their disabling condition are nevertheless provided by a number of miracle accounts of the middle and late Byzantine period. My paper will discuss several such cases of disabled children and the way gender, age and social status may have influenced their lived experiences.

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Crapo, Adleen: Choosing Their Words Carefully: Lexicography to Explore Early Modern Experiences of Disability

The early modern period would not have used the category of “disabled” to describe people with varying impairments. A comparatist project on disabled authors demonstrates that lexicography serves a crucial function in any examination of disability in the period. Canonical authors from Cervantes to Milton discuss disability in their work, increasing the richness of the period’s vocabulary of disability and allowing them to carefully render their lived experience of disability. Lexicographical study reveals the ways in which period ideas of disability were linked to language: disability could call into question a person’s perceived ability to use language, just as language
and texts could themselves be disabled if improperly used. In Puttenham’s Art of English Poesy, he defines a rhetorical figure (meiosis) as a “disabler” because the figure “diminishes[s] and abase[s] a thing.” A person’s use of words could be disabled/abased, just as disabled people might not use language as well and as morally as able-bodied people. Disabled authors delicately manoeuvred to refigure their disabilities as a source of inspiration, while insisting that disability itself would not lead to disabled, deformed, or inaccurate uses of language. In portraying their lived realities, they also impacted period vocabularies and understandings of disability.

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Crocker, Christopher: Disability and Dreams in the Medieval Icelandic Sagas

Paranormal dreams appear throughout medieval Icelandic saga writing, typically exhibiting some kind of anticipatory or prophetic function. Such dreams are often linked to physical conflicts taking place during the subsequent events of the dreamer’s waking life, which commonly result in injury, impairment, or even death. However, there are several dreams described in the sagas that seem to bear a more directly causal connection to various mental, physical, or sensory impairments arising from specific actions or events taking place within the dreams themselves. Through several illustrative examples, this paper will explore the apparent connection between paranormal dreams and the onset (or alleviation) of mental, physical, and/or sensory impairment as depicted in the sagas. It will consider the possibility of a meaningful intersection between the experience of dreaming and the premise of disability in the context of medieval Icelandic culture and society.

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Derksen, Anna: Negotiating Charity. The Nordic Disability Movements and Experiences of Charity and Welfare in the Mid-20th Century

This paper looks at several instances in Nordic disability history as a way to think about how public representation and experiences of disability are linked to questions of charity, welfare and autonomy. With the Nordic welfare states prospering after WWII, persons with disabilities emerged as a group that was both politically marginalized and socially isolated. Public efforts like fundraising galas and charity campaigns were well-intended, but often met with fervent criticism from disability activists. By four examples, the TV gala Röda Fjädern in Sweden and the Norwegian movement Justice for the Handicapped in the 1960s, as well as discussions of voluntary work and means-tested
pensions in Sweden and Denmark during the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, I analyze how disability welfare and charity were framed by both internal and external actors. How did persons with disabilities experience and react to these discussions, and how were their (alleged) experiences portrayed by public actors? What actually counts as experiences of disability – and who has the right to define this?

The regional focus and rich source material from disability organizations, media contributions and other public sources allow to compare Nordic perceptions of welfare (and its antagonist, charity) from a multi-perspectivist approach. I argue that these disputes about charity in general, and fundraising events in particular, were crucial in consolidating persons with disabilities to share their experiences, to gather in organizations and vocalize their demands as a joint force, but also in thinking critically about their relationships with the state and other social actors.

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**Digard, Lola: Alleviate and Compensate: The Office des Paiseurs in the County of Flanders in the late Middle Ages**

In urban communities of the late Middle Ages conflicts between citizens was a great source of injuries which often resulted in permanent physical impairments. In the County of Flanders, the office of the Paiseur was one solution devised by municipal governments already from the 11th century to address conflicts rising in the community before they escalated to physical violence, and to offer financial and social stability to citizen that have already been injured. This office differed from a court of law in that it had no punitive capacity; its main goal was not to reach a condemnation of the defendant, but to resolve the conflict. The office consisted of open hearings in which the victims presented themselves and requested compensations from their attacker. The sentence not only offered financial compensation destined to cover the medical costs and the loss of wages associated with disability, but also offered honourable measures to alleviate the shame associated with disability.

This paper will explore what kind of social and financial security the office offered to disabled citizen, but also what kind of compensations they expected, thus offering a deep hindsight into the experience of disability in the County of Flanders in the late middle ages.

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Dijkstra, Nathanje: Exploring the Possibilities of Praxiography for Analysing Dis/ability Experiences in History

The social model of dis/ability has been central to research in the field of dis/ability history. While rightfully criticising the medical model for its excluding and stigmatising tendencies, the social model has become under attack for its neglect of individual differences and material experience of dis/ability (Goodly 2013, Corker & Shakespeare 2002). The question is: how can we include corporeal experiences of dis/ability in history, without perpetuating excluding notions and practices that come with the medical or materialist analysis of dis/ability?

Praxiography as introduced by Annemarie Mol, approaches the body as something that is being done in encounters between people, objects and practices (Mol 2002). The focus is on what works as reality and therewith turns into a reality. Praxiography has so far been successfully used to reintroduce material experiences of the body in the analysis of race/ethnicity and sex/gender (M’Charek 2013; Mak 2012), but not relating to disability.

In this paper, I will use praxiography to analyse experiences of dis/ability in the context of the first act regulating the insurance of workers in cases of accidents in the Netherlands (1901-1967). I will consider the in- and excluding practices brought forth by this act, and I will analyse its impact on reported experiences of dis/ability in cases of amputation. By doing so I will explore the possibilities as well as obstacles of using praxiography as method for studying dis/ability experiences in history.

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Dinu, Radu Harald: Disability under Communism in Eastern Europe. What we know and what we don’t know

During the last decades, historical research on disability has been primarily conducted in Western Europe and North America. Consequently, disability history still focuses on Western attitudes towards disability. Perspectives on disabilities outside the West have recently broadened our understanding but remain scarce. Using the examples of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and the GDR, this paper seeks to provide an overview of disability policies under communism. It addresses the question whether the communist ideology provides a common denominator for studying disability in Eastern Europe. Communist states in Eastern Europe were never a homogenous entity. Additionally, certain trajectories in disability policies reflect global trends that go beyond socialism. Nevertheless, there was a specific theme that lay at the core of the communist world view, namely the glorification of physical labour and working class heroes. Labour played a crucial role for disability policies since communist regimes strove for moulding productive workers and “useful” citizens. At the same time these policies resulted in a discrepancy between official proclamations and social reality of disabled persons. This paper argues that the function and appearance of disabled persons’ bodies, challenged the very core of the communist work ethic.
Due to their disability, cleric or lay supplicants needed to ask the Pope for dispensations, to contravene some religious practices. Throughout the 13th century, Christian identity was firmly constituted. Christians found their marks and representations in religion, as a common culture of Christendom. I propose to investigate the link between religiosity and disability along two main aspects: the vow and the reception of sacraments. Papal dispensation letters, since they were typically written by a supplicant to deal with a personal situation, provide us with important information about vow transgression by an individual. If his condition became particularly serious, a disabled person can be prevented from fulfilling his wishes of pilgrimage or from respecting the rigour of the Christian eating rules. On the other hand, disability could affect one’s possibility to go to the church. Accordingly, the relevant recipients may benefit from a portable altar, a personal priest or a private confessor. These favours, particularly granted during the 14th century, reveals the personalization of the relationship to the divine. In the end, disability strongly impacted the profoundly personal religiosity of an individual and his daily life, but the papal letters could allow a disabled person to be a good Christian despite his invalidity.

Ebenezersdóttir, Eva Thórdís: Differently Human or Simply Supernatural

“Whether we recognize it or not the life of disability is both a story that we live and a story that we tell, and it is surrounding us.” (Titchosky and Michalko, 2014). In 19th century Icelandic folktale there are complex stories of family ghosts that wreak havoc in people’s lives, affecting behaviour and health in each generation. In a time before the modern idea of disability these stories tell of differences and human diversity. The legends include different levels of exclusion and othering caused by a change in individual behaviour. Intersectionality also comes into play as gender, social status and age affect how the narratives deal with why and how some individuals are, or become, different from others.

By examining this material with historical discourse analysis, the aim is to bring forward underlying power relations that influence marginalisation and show how supernatural beliefs shaped people’s understanding and reaction towards those who were thought to behave differently. To show that an individual could be believed to be different because she was hunted by a family ghost, or that she was indeed a supernatural entity herself; a ghost, haunted or disabled, different enough to become the topic of legends.
Elrod, Ashley: Debating Incompetence: Law and the Lived Experience of Disability in Early Modern Germany

This paper will examine how early modern German law defined the experience of people deemed incompetent (sinnlos, ohne Verstand, unvernünftig, etc.) by their communities. In the sixteenth century, southern states and cities revived old Roman guardianship laws that curtailed the rights of people with mental and some physical impairments. In practice, conceptions of “normal” and “impaired” bodies and minds raised intense debate at the level of local communities. German civil courts weighed evidence from defendants, relatives, and neighbors to determine whether to define an adult as legally incompetent (mundtot), a shift in legal status that some observers have described as “dying a civil death.” Incompetence hearings offer historians a unique opportunity to see how historical individuals claimed and disputed disability on the level of local and familial conflicts. While this paper will focus on case studies from the early modern period, it will also reflect on the usefulness of adult guardianship records as a historical source—particularly considering that some aspects of European guardianship law and judicial procedure remained remarkably consistent in Roman-based legal systems from the late Middle Ages through the late twentieth century.

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Eyice, Mari: The Outer Periphery of Empathy – Disability and Emotional Practices in Early Modern Sweden

In my paper, I will present my first thoughts on a new postdoc-project on disability and emotional practices in early modern Sweden. I argue that the theoretical framework of disability studies offers a fruitful way to study culturally specific forms of empathy. If emotions are shaped by bodily practices, as is a common understanding within the history of emotions-field, then physical disability should be significant in the practicing of emotions. I would like to argue that empathy was historically formed in relation to people with disabilities in the early modern period. This means that the variety of bodily abilities that comes to the fore with a disability studies perspective are significant in the making of emotions.

The concept of empathy is modern and is thus absent in early modern sources, which means that the forms and language empathy as practice takes will be open to investigation. The 16–17th centuries in Protestant areas are of special significance with regards to empathy, since this period constitutes the period between the medieval discourse on religious compassion and the turn to
sensibility with its focus on pity in the 18th century. Thus, the 16- and 17th centuries constitute a period where general norms regarding empathy were less rigid than before and after. Historical research has shown that institutions for and activities of care for people with disabilities changed significantly as a result of these normative changes.

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Farrell, Anthony: Disabled veterans of the First World War in Ireland and the Irish Free State 1914 to 1945

The contentiousness of treatment for disabled war veterans stems in large part from the possible claims against the state. This was more problematic when the Irish Free State was established where veterans of the Great War received scant recognition and no government support. Instead successive British governments provided pensions and medical care veterans as an ‘Imperial Obligation’. Because more personnel were killed in combat during the war than by other means, there is a presumption that disability pensions for wounds significantly outnumber those for illness or disease. For British veterans in general and ex-British veterans in the Irish Free State in particular, this was not so. By using the annual reports of the Ministry of Pensions and patient registers of the Ministry of Pensions hospitals retained in the Free State, it is proposed to challenge preconceptions of the health issues that confronted disabled veterans in the interwar years. Not only were the numbers of veterans admitted to these hospitals with illness or disease greater than any other cause, but there were specific categories of illness and disease that have not been recognised before.

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Haraldsson, Haraldur Thór Hammer: Lived lives of the different bodied dead – A bioarchaeological approach to disability in Medieval Iceland

People with impairments of all kinds, be it physical or cognitive, have been a part of humanity since its very beginning. These people, who have formed an integral part of every society in Earths past to the present have gone relatively unnoticed in the archaeological record. Their remains have been excavated, documented and studied, however their stories, their lives, have not been the focal point of archaeological enquery. This study aims to bring the embodied experiences of skeletal remains of different bodied people to the forefront. One of the main ways in which we intend to bring these embodied experiences of the dead to life is to produce a fictive – yet factual-osteobiography, a story that incorporates all the observable evidence from the skeleton as well as available literature with the intent to build a life story of a different bodied person from
Iceland’s past. Problematic issues associated with these methods will also be raised, such as giving names to skeletal remains, “filling in the blanks” in academic work and how imagination and intuition are used to produce such stories. This talk will argue that these methods are vital to give the best probable insight into the lived lives of past peoples with different bodies and their contemporary societies when the available and observable evidence is scarce.

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Hudson, Geoffrey L.: Gender, Social Negotiation & Disabled Ex-servicemen in England, 1600–1800

‘No child on earth, no hysterical female, nor the most highly pampered miss of eighteen can outdo some of the pensioners in this hospital in whims and ridiculous fancies. In a word, the character of the pensioner retains little of the character of the sailor.’ So wrote Robert Robertson, the Royal Greenwich Hospital physician in the late 18th century. War resulted in the return of ex-servicemen who were reduced in body, disabled to work, and unable to fulfill contemporary expectations of masculinity in some respects. John Tosh has commented that ‘along with the exercise of family authority, the bearing of arms had been the central attribute of manhood since feudal times.’ War and state provision for the disabled did reduce men in the eyes of some. This paper will examine the attitudes, actions and experience of disabled ex-servicemen and their family member, as well as those in authority, to explore the gendered nature of the social negotiation that took place inside and outside relevant pension schemes and institutions. Sources include petitions from the disabled themselves, detailed hospital and pension records, and state papers. Consideration shall be given the changing nature of the family, the role of the state, and the micro-politics of negotiation. The conclusion will historically contextualize and contest the gendered critique offered by Robertson.

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Jarrett, Simon: Myths of Marginality: Locating the Idiot in the Eighteenth Century

In 1998 the historian Jonathan Andrews wrote the first systematic investigation of ‘idiocy’ in eighteenth-century Britain. His exhaustive review of institutional records suggested that very few idiots were in institutional care, and that there was a ‘profound disregard for idiocy as a medical problem’. From this he concluded that eighteenth-century idiots were highly
marginalised, their ‘lonely ontological status’ driven by the idea of ineducability. This paper will dispute the notion that absence from institutional records implies marginalisation. Using my own research into eighteenth-century idiocy as an example, I will argue that an examination of cultural sources – including jokes, novels, caricature, painting, court records, chapbooks, travel literature, sermons, diaries, legal tracts – can reveal an integrated, and accepted, community presence of those assumed to be excluded.

The political theorist Janice Perlman has argued that ‘marginality’ can operate as a myth offering a ‘compelling yet simple explanation of a social reality.’ The assumption by historians of marginalisation and exclusion of any group can, in itself, be part of an exclusionary drive against them – a power dynamic emerges as the group is problematised. I will argue that while exclusion is an important feature of the lived experience of those labelled ‘intellectually disabled’, the pre-asylum era offers a competing narrative of inclusion and community acceptance which has been masked by the fetishization of institutional sources and objectifying assumptions of marginality.

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Katajala-Peltomaa, Sari: (Dis)abling Practices: Saints, Demons and Maniacs in the Late Middle Ages

Demonic possession was a spiritual state with physical and mental symptoms and social outcomes. The possessed could have been out of their minds, violent and aggressive or suffer mainly from physical impairments, like the loss of use of a limb. Furthermore, the dividing line between spirit possession and physical illness was not clear-cut. The infirmity itself (whether it was of natural or supernatural origin) as well as the practices of caregiving could have incapacitated the patients from their ordinary activities and positions. This paper seeks to explore how the condition of demonic possession was linked to the experience of disability in its social and cultural sense. The chosen source material, namely depositions in late medieval canonization processes, offer an insight into the intersection of lived religion, healing practices and cultures of care. Religion formed the frame for interpretation and experience of demonic presence but it also offered means to cope with the situation; finally it also enabled restoration of social capacity and ability.

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Koivisto, Maija: Eugenic, Deaf Women, Marriage Law, Sterilization and Abortions in Finland 1929–1969

In my currently PhD research project I’m researching how ideology of eugenics affected sign language communities, especially deaf women. A marriage law passed in 1929. That law prohibited marriage between prelingually deaf persons. Under the provisions of a sterilization law passed six years later, 7530 women were sterilized from 1935-70, including at least 14 deaf women. The sign language community has always known about this practice, but nobody knows for sure how many deaf women (and men) were sterilized. In sign language community has known that some circumvented the marriage laws by becoming pregnant, thus forcing priests to wed them. Nevertheless, some had to agree to sterilization after that. Others chose to ‘live in sin’; cohabiting and giving birth to children out of wedlock was considered unacceptable at that time. This has the greatest impact on deaf women. The topic of sterilization and as other historical wrongs, has long been a taboo due to society’s attitude involving shame, especially among deaf women. In my research I’m interested in figuring out how deaf women are described in documents, how sterilized deaf women has seen by sign language community and deaf women’s experiences about forced sterilization and abortions.

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Kuuliala, Jenni & Riikka Miettinen: Searching for Experiences in Late Medieval and Early Modern Legal Documents

Can legal documentation created for very specific administrative purposes from centuries ago offer something for the research of experiences of disabilities? In this paper we explore the contents and use of different types of legal (secular and ecclesiastical) documents for the study of late medieval and early modern experiences of dis/abilities. Drawing from our personal research projects, related to infirmity and religious healing in Renaissance/early modern Italy and the lives and care of the insane/mentally disabled in early modern Sweden, we discuss the ways in which we deploy legal documents in reconstructing individual and communal ‘experiences of dis/abilities’ in our studies. Furthermore, we ask how these documents recorded people’s experiences: why and for what purposes were experiences of dis/ability referred to? The legal material discussed consists of court records from various kinds of tribunals and institutions, judicial letters, legislation, as well as canonization and inquisition records.

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Laine-Frigren, Tuomas: Adjusting Emotions. Psychosocial Rehabilitation of Finnish Brain-injured Soldiers in the 1940s–1950s

L. Stephen Jacuna and Stephen T. Casper write in The Neurological Patient in History (2012) that neurological diseases and disabilities strike at the core of “what in Western culture is taken to constitute personal identity, social status and competence”. Indeed, the complex medical and psychological, sociocultural nature of brain injuries has been thought-provokingly presented in many famous books, such as The Mind of a Mnemonist by Alexander Luria and Over My Head by Claudia Osborn. In this paper, I will examine the psychosocial rehabilitation of Finnish brain injured war veterans in post-WWII Finland. By studying the therapeutic encounters between the psychologist and the disabled soldier, the paper shows how the aim of the rehabilitation was not only to “rationally” adjust the individual to postwar (work) society, but also to make him realize his new psychological, emotional and physical state. The paper focuses on “treatment ideology”, which is understood as a complex set of medical and cultural beliefs about health and illness; about the validity of treatment in question; about the provider of health; and the role of the patient. The methodological framework of this study is based on social and cultural history of medicine.

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Langum, Virginia: “Tried to make you something you’re not”: Disability and Historical Fiction

The interest in recovering experiences of disability from the past is increasingly of interest to writers and historians. For example, a recent BBC series “Disability: a New History” recreates voices from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Historical fiction may play an important role in recovering past experiences where the historical record is partial or empty. Several recent works of historical fiction develop the lives of both historical and fictional characters. For example, Christina Baker Kline’s A Piece of the World (2017) takes its protagonist from the famous Andrew Wyeth painting “Christina’s World” (1948). Jennifer Egan’s Manhattan Beach (2017) portrays the emotional and physical reality of caring for a quadriplegic character during the Depression. While some studies consider the representation of disability in genre fiction, little scholarship theorizes the representation of disability in historical fiction.

This paper reads What is Visible (2014), a historical novel based on the life of Laura Bridgman (d. 1889) with Georgina Kleege’s Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller (2006) for how historical fiction can illuminate current issues in disability studies and history. In affording their protagonists an inner life censored or not found in the historical evidence, the texts respond to issues of narrative prosthesis, cultural appropriation and the poster child.

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Lindberg, Hanna: Being a Minority within a Minority. The Case of the Finland-Swedish Deaf in the mid-20th Century

One of Finland’s smallest minorities, the Finland-Swedish deaf, has over the course of the 20th century gone from a vital community to becoming nearly extinct. The Finnish welfare state grew considerably in the second half of the 20th century, also encompassing disabled people’s rights to education and services. However, for a small minority, these rights were often difficult carry into effect. Due to a lack of educational opportunities and social services, the Finland-Swedish deaf started to move to Sweden from the 1950s onwards.

In my ongoing research on the Finland-Swedish deaf community during the second half of the 20th century, I am analyzing their struggle for rights, as well as the construction of a minority identity, during a time when the Finnish welfare state was established, and a transnational deaf awareness movement spread across the Western world. In this paper I will analyze the experiences of a minority in the intersection of disability, and ethnicity during the mid-twentieth century, when the process of migration was starting. How did the Finland-Swedish deaf view their position in Finnish society, and what were the reasons and reasonings behind leaving their home country? By focusing on the lived experiences of small minority group, I hope to illustrate the limits of social inclusion.

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Liski, Virva: Mental Disability among Veterans of the Finnish Civil War in 1918–1939

Many of the former soldiers and prison camp survivors of the 1918 Finnish civil war on both Red and White side suffered from war-related life-long mental disabilities. Even though Finnish inter-war period psychiatrists were disagreeing about the source and motives behind traumatic neurosis or veterans’ mental breakdowns, the Finnish Jäger movement and White invalid organizations alongside with leading officers of the Finnish army were quite like-minded about the phenomenon: accepting. Attitude towards mental invalids was however an ideological one; mentally wounded White army veterans and Jägers, also the ones with working class background, were to be taken care of by the government, whereas there was little support or understanding towards the former Red side soldiers in similar circumstances. Interestingly, financial compensations were paid for White mental invalids only two years before the WWII when attitudes towards war neurosis turned to be completely non-accepting. I use versatile patient records, compensation claims and newspaper materials in order to present a new approaches towards the Finnish inter-war period psychiatry, ideological sympathy towards war-related disability and far-reaching psychological consequences of civil war.

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This presentation interrogates the legal politics of double amputee and political radical E.T. Kingsley. Born in New York State, Kingsley became a double amputee in 1890 while working as a brakeman on the Northern Pacific Railway in Montana. Born in the antebellum United States, Kingsley was radicalized after his accident and joined Daniel De Leon’s Socialist Labor Party in San Francisco, California, where he fought for free speech and ran twice for the House of Representatives. In 1902, he moved first to Nanaimo, British Columbia, where he worked as a fish monger, and then Vancouver where he operated a print shop and became a leading member of the Socialist Party of Canada, editing its newspaper, the Western Clarion. Kingsley ran for the House of Commons and British Columbia Legislature no fewer than six times. He went on to become a central leader of the forgotten Socialist Party of Canada and ran for the US House of Representatives, the Canadian House of Commons and the British Columbia Legislature numerous times. We explore the significance of disablement and its relationship to Kingsley’s quest to radically transform capitalism.

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McDonagh, Patrick: Romantic Ideology and the Conceptualization of Idiocy

This paper argues that a shift in the concept of “idiocy” began to be articulated in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, aligned with notions of identity and value expressed by philosophers and writers who would eventually be classified as “romantics.” It examines the development of this newly emerging conception of “idiocy” through an exploration of literary and philosophical works, correspondence, and later writings in support of institutions for people identified as “idiots.” Take, for example, an exchange on the value ascribed to “idiocy” between the poet William Wordsworth and John Wilson, who would become a leading intellectual of the day. In an 1802 critique of Wordsworth’s poem “The Idiot Boy,” published in 1798, Wilson writes that “The inability to receive pleasure from descriptions ... is, I am convinced, founded upon established feelings of human nature.” Wordsworth’s extended reply argues a different aesthetic and intellectual interpretation of both the concept of idiocy and also of the “human nature” invoked by Wilson. The presentation will also draw on writings by such figures as the philosophers Edmund Burke and Thomas Carlyle, and poets Robert Southey and Dora Greenwell, tracking how they helped shape notions of idiocy invoked later in the 19th century by advocates for institutions.

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McKenzie, Catriona J. & Eileen M. Murphy: Considering Care: Flexion Deformities in the Gaelic Medieval Population of Ballyhanna, Co. Donegal, Ireland

Two individuals from the Gaelic medieval population of Ballyhanna, Co. Donegal, Ireland had flexion deformities evident in their skeletal remains, resulting in obvious physical impairments and mobility issues. The Bioarchaeology of Care approach has been adopted to assess the likely care and treatment which may have been provided. In the first case study, a healed central acetabular fracture-dislocation was identified in the left hip joint of an adult male. This was a major injury and clinical data indicates that, even in modern populations, this type of injury is particularly difficult to treat. In the second case study, the flexion deformity resulted in osseous ankyloses of the left knee joint in a middle-aged male, this was likely caused by either septic or tuberculous arthritis. The discussion will focus on the immediate care that both of these individuals may have received, and the accommodations that may have been made later in life.

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Mounsey, Chris: Documenting the life of Thomas Gills, Blind Man of St Edmundsbury

Unless people with disabilities were in receipt of charitable payments it is very hard to document the daily details of their lives. Thomas Gills is a case in point. As a catechist and a poet for children, this blind man’s work, available on Eighteenth Century Collections Online, suggest he was poor but believed himself responsible for his own care. As the writer of a poem about his varying condition incorporating paralysis and blindness, we may understand something about how he felt the physical experience of his body – but these poems and catechisms make up only a fragment of his output. Recent discoveries which include lurid accounts of duels thought in London alongside further catechisms and a poem about his daily life as a blind man in London add a wife and child to his family and depict a family business in which Thomas, Nab and Deb each had their roles in the production and sale of work of contemporary interest. This paper explores the vicissitudes of being blind in the eighteenth century and researching the lives of disabled people. It argues ultimately that all descriptions of the lives of impaired people in history must remain provisional.

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Muca, Klaudia: Between Two Wars. Experience of Disability in 1918–1939 in Poland

After the year 1918, when Poland restored independence, several social issues were brought to light by the government and social activists of the time. What is particularly important from the view of minority studies is the fact that the system of social services, charity organizations and help industries started to develop in the new socio-political reality. The process of significant development regarding social services had its pros and cons. What is crucial to consider is the fact that it resulted in establishing the representation of the disabled as objects of social services. At that time the objectification of disability was enhanced by psychoanalytical movement that was introduced in Poland around the 1910s. As objects of social and political actions the disabled were excluded from the frame of citizenship that is able to protect and support restored freedom. What needs to be highlighted here is the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century people with disabilities were still perceived as citizens that need to be separated from the “health” and “normal” part of the society. In the presentation the history of social injustice in Poland form 1918 until 1939 is being considered as well as autobiographical stories and non-fictional narrations on experiences of the disabled.

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Ólafsdóttir, Sólveig: The Shelter from the Storm

Researches into the Life-Threads of physically and psychologically disable Icelandic people during bygone ages, shed a light on the interesting role of those who provided individuals in a fragile position a shelter from the inhospitable Icelandic farmers society. Those could be specific family members or even unrelated individuals in the same household. The relationship between the powerless individual and its caretaker could be formalized by the local authorities but was more often informal and very emotional. It became very visible if the powerless lost their shelter because of various reasons. This presentation will trace Life-Threads of two individuals, Bjorg Olafsdottir, (1831-1904) and Kaprasius Gudmundsson (1853-1893). Both of them had “a shelter” from harsh environment which disappeared during a critical time of their life.

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This work presents an osteobiographic analysis of dependent and disabled individuals from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century US. The goal is to develop a novel method to recover the experience of those groups and to better understand the primary contexts of their care, home vs. institutional settings. This study shows that factors such as differing degrees of individual agency, familial support, expectations of citizenship, economics, and the category of dependency were all determinants that impacted “experience.” Osteobiography is a method that combines skeletal biology with detailed documentary information. The combination of biological and documentary data is used to develop osteobiographic profiles that includes overall health, trauma, activity, diet, pathology, and life history. The materials for the study include skeletal and documentary collections for the Oneida County Asylum; the Vigo County Home; and the Terry Collection, Smithsonian Institution. These collections provide information on disabled and dependent individuals from home and institutional contexts in the US from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. This study is novel in its application of osteobiography. The combined recovery of biological and documentary data provides important insights to better understand the experiences of dependent and disabled individuals.

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Probert, Tom: ‘[A]n adventure into mental illness’: Psychiatry and Stigma during Britain's postwar period of decolonisation

During the Second World War systems of psychiatric triage were developed to deal with psychiatric casualties. Within this context, treatment, most notably physical methods in conjunction with simple psychotherapy, were employed to return service personnel to duty. As one British military psychiatrist put it: ‘his patient is the Army’. The postwar period saw the emergence of the National Health Service which would become responsible for the care of citizens experiencing psychiatric conditions. Abroad then, the Royal Army Medical Corps had become implicated in the psychiatric care of not only service personnel but also their families. This paper will contrast the differing attitudes of service psychiatrists toward soldiers and their families. While care was taken to avoid the application of a psychiatric label to soldiers, which could inhibit further career prospects and result in protracted treatments, the psychiatric conditions seen in the wives of service personnel were dismissed as fashionable adventures into mental illness. In this way, this paper will show how psychiatric attitudes became instrumentalized by reflecting the more immediate military need to conserve manpower over the wider responsibility which service psychiatrists had toward the families of service personnel.

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Reyniers, Nele & Pieter Verstraete: Rethinking ‘Experience’ in the History of Children with Mental Disability

In this presentation, we will outline how the notion ‘experience’ is used in contemporary histories of children with disabilities in asylums. We will distinguish two dominant approaches: the collective approach and the individual approach. Both approaches are based on the same sources, namely administrative (medical) registers, which have their shortcomings in representing the ‘real’ life experiences of the children. Looking at theories on ‘experience’, two critiques are often heard: the ‘methodological inadequacies’ and its ‘general flakiness’ as a concept. This paper will elaborate on both issues by looking for alternative ways to carry out this study. The historians Robin George Collingwood and Wilhelm Dilthey argue that it is (only) possible to awaken experiences from the past by re-experiencing them in the present as a researcher and/or reader. This paper, however claims that such re-experiencing is not without risk and argues against it by referring to ethical and practical issues raised by Kaisa Vehkalahti and Linda Alcoff.

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Riordan, Michael: Blind Devotion: Sight-Loss and Religion in Early Modern Britain

In his 2007 work, Vanities of the Eye, Stuart Clark argued that after the Reformation, intellectuals started to disparage the faculty of sight and conversely lauded blind people, who could not be distracted by their eyes, which were the primary mechanism the Devil used to deceive humankind. This paper assesses the implications of this development on religious experiences of blind people in early modern Britain. It does this by examining the devotional lives of a famous English poet and an obscure Scottish laird: John Milton, who wrote Paradise Lost after he went blind, and Alexander, 3rd Earl of Kincardine, who spent his adult life blinded, after falling off his horse. These roughly contemporary cases show common features. For both, physical impairment was believed to entail deeper religious insight. Both employed adjustments to fully participate in public life. Their cases show the limitations of existing medical and social models of disability, and reveal that blindness could be a virtue for blind men in early modern Britain. The paper concludes by setting out a wider research agenda on blindness and religion in the early modern world which takes into account the positive experiences of blind men and women.

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Russenberger, Heidi: Disability, Bodies, and Identities in Fourteenth Century Canonisation Inquests

History manifests itself through bodies: identity and action are determined by bodily capacities, which in turn are influenced and understood by prevailing cultural concepts. Our capabilities are limited by our own physicality; our emotional response to our body and its limits is informed by our wider socio-cultural context and other people’s perceptions of our bodies. We respond to other people’s bodies; conceptualizing and re-conceptualizing our sense of self according to the other bodies we interact with. Our socio-cultural context is created through bodies, and in turn influences how we understand these bodies. However, social and cultural histories continue to underplay the importance of the interaction between physicality, psyche, identity, and action. Disability history provides a vital opportunity to reinstate the body as an integral part of historical analyses. The social model of disability has been particularly useful in providing a framework to explore the interplay of the physical, the emotional, and social perception in the construction of selfhood, transforming disability from an observed medical problem to a lived, culturally-determined experience. However, the use of models – particularly for historical analyses of identity and selfhood – is not without its limitations: the generalizing impulse inherent in models can obscure the highly contextual nature of lived experiences and the intersection of disability with other facets of identity.

This paper explores the role of (disabled) bodies in the construction of identity and selfhood through 14th century canonization inquests. By paying particular attention to descriptions of and responses to disability, it is possible to deepen our understandings of disabled experience and the physical body within social relations as the site of the self.

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Šalkovskis, Cora: Speaking of without speaking for: Anonymity, Ethics, the Dead, and the Psychiatric Historian

What are the ethical obligations of those who work with the dead (or the very dead)? When writing histories of the psychiatric patient, historians of the last few decades have generally emphasised helping the marginalised subject speak; seeking to access the lived experiences of those who we only hear or see through the words of their doctors and the institution of the asylum and for whom what they said of their experiences was itself evidence of disability and deviance. Less frequently considered, but equally crucial, is whether they wanted to speak or be heard? And, if they do, how can the historian facilitate this in some measure without engaging in an equally paternalistic act of power or re-voicing? Ultimately, does the historian have the consent of the dead to tell their story and what rights do the dead have to this story? This paper will address these questions considering vulnerability, anonymity, power, and issues of silence in the archive, arguing that whilst our methodological choices might aim to protect, we often risk
adding another layer of silence to a person’s narrative and reinforcing the idea that these experiences are extraordinary, shameful, and somehow replace personhood with patienthood or victimhood.

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Scalenghe, Sara: Visual Representations of Disability in the Late Ottoman Empire

There is a rich and growing body of literature on the relationship between photography in the 19th and early 20th centuries and modernity, Orientalism, and European colonialism in the Middle East (Alloula 1986, Ozendes 1987, Graham-Brown 1988, Perez 1998, Erdoğanu 1999, Woodward 2003, Behdad and Gartlan 2013, Çelik and Eldem 2015, Behdad 2016, Sheehi 2016). Much of this scholarship has noted Europe’s photographic obsession with the “Oriental” woman and has convincingly demonstrated that the portrayal of women as exotic, timeless, passive, and oppressed beings in need of saving was used as one of the moral justifications for European colonial ambitions in the region. An aspect of photography that remains almost entirely unexplored, however, is the representation of “Oriental” non-normative bodies: impaired, disfigured, deformed, grotesque, odd. This paper hopes to contribute to redressing the balance by examining representations of Ottoman disabled bodies produced mostly in the region that corresponds to today’s Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Turkey in the late 19th century. I examine not only European photographers like the Italian-French Tancrède Dumas (1830-1905) and the French French Félix Bonfils (1831-1885), but also some local photographers, including those featured in the 1893 Sultan Abdul Hamid II Collection. Theoretically, I adopt a Disability Studies approach informed by the groundbreaking work on photography and disability by Rosemarie Garland Thomson (2001) and Robert Bogdan (2012). Prominent Disability Studies theorist Rosemary Garland-Thomson in particular famously proposed a taxonomy of four primary visual rhetorics of disability in photography: wondrous, sentimental, exotic, and realistic. The core argument I make is that much like the images of women, representations of disability, too, were used as metaphors for the abject state of the Ottoman Empire and served to reinforce the notion of the Orient as the “Other.” Thus, disability was inextricably intertwined with the European colonial project. But, importantly, as the Sultan Abdul Hamid II Collection demonstrates, depictions of disability were also inextricably linked with Ottoman modernization efforts.

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Sigurjónsdóttir, Hanna Björg: Disability, Punishments and Poverty in Iceland (1500-1800).

The paper focuses on the interplay between disability, punishment and poverty in Icelandic society during the 16th, 17th and 18th century. Through this period natural disasters, economic hardship, extreme weather condition and plagues impacted upon the lives and conditions in Iceland making it difficult for many to survive. Severe penalties for stealing were pursued and punishments included both death sentences and physical punishment, such as markings, scourges and mutilation. During these three centuries at least 76 individuals accused for stealing were executed and much higher number of people were mutilated. In addition to obvious physical pain, the punishment not only marked the body but also restricted people’s ability to provide for themselves. The goal of the project is to obtain information about this marginalized group and increase knowledge and understanding of the position of doomed individuals in times of hardiness and harsh punishments - punishments that acted to produce disability in a manner that has so far received little scholarly attention.

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Stasiak, Marcin: "Look! He is a Cripple, But He Can Climb Trees!" Childhood in Life Stories of People with Polio-Related Impairments – Polish Case

The paper explores ways in which polio-related impairments affected childhood of people who caught polio in Poland during the epidemics in the 1950s and shows how that experiences were reflected in their life stories. The study is based primarily (but not only) on 25 in-depth interviews recorded by me in the past few years. The oldest interviewee was born in 1946, the youngest in 1959. Majority of them were born in the 50s. They caught polio as infants or in early childhood. The consequences of infection included paralysis of various parts of muscles (mostly legs were affected) Drawing on their stories the paper is focused on the impact of the medical practice on their everyday life. It explores, how health-care facilities, medical staff and orthopaedic devices shaped polio survivors lives on that stage. As they spent at least part of childhood in hospitals, the study draws particular attention to the redefinitions of the private sphere as well as notions of home and family. Secondly, it addresses a question, how specific impairments affected their interactions with “able-bodied” counterparts.

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Tuohela, Kirsi: Mental Disability in the 1930s Finland, The Case of Aino Manner (1893-1956)

In this paper I discuss the question of mental disability in the context 1930s Finland. A ask what it meant to a patient when she got a psychiatric diagnosis and was hospitalized several times. A rich source to investigate such an early patient’s experience is the first asylum autobiography written in Finnish in the 1930s, a book entitled Viesti yöstä (1935, A Message from the Night), written by a Finnish female patient Aino Manner.

In the paper I introduce Manner’s patient history, the autobiography she wrote, and contextualize her case to the rising modern psychiatric care in Finland in 1930s. New “white castles”, new District Hospital for mental patients arouse in 1920s and 1930s, and Aino Manner visited two such modern institutions in addition to an older type of mental asylum and a communal home (kunnalliskoti). The modern care that she received was a helpful and Manner was several times written out from the hospital. However each time she left the hospital she had fewer friends and less opportunities to employment, so, her mental illness led to an increasing disability – despite the good will of the society to improve her situation and integrate the mildly disabled like her to their communities.

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Vikström, Lotta: Disability and Partnership in Sweden from Past to Present

Historically, marriage and family were the aims of most young people. Still today partnership and parenthood signify key transitions to adulthood and recognition as a ‘real’ man or woman. The UN’s Conventions on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 23) stress the right of all ‘who are of marriageable age to marry and to form a family on the basis of free and full consent of the intending spouses is recognized’. While contemporary studies from across the globe suggest that disabilities jeopardize humans’ health and make them weaker positioned in the labour market than the ‘able’ majority, there is poor knowledge in both society and research on how disabilities affect partnering. This gap is partly because impairments tend to make individuals less perceived as desiring subjects or partners by their environment. Such disabling circumstances may go long back in time and can have far-reaching outcomes on the social equality and wellbeing of disabled people and their status in social life and society today. This study aims to answer the question on how disabilities influence people’s lives from the 19th-century Sweden until now in terms of accessing a partner.

The results originate from the ERC-funded DISLIFE project, led by one of the authors, and are primarily based on quantitative methods using Swedish population registers. These data indicate type of impairment (sensory, physically, mentally) at the micro-level, enabling statistical analysis on how multiple intersections of disability, age, gender and socio-economic status play out in human life and society depending on time-space setting.

Our study draws together findings on how disabilities have shaped men’s and women’s transition to partnership in Sweden the recent two centuries. Investigating the access to a close relationship
this way, we gain knowledge on whether and how disabilities work to disfavour social inclusion in different societal structures. The longitudinal scope helps identify continuity and change across time and human life. The results are of international interest as they provide a relief for comparisons and target a transition ignored from disability dimensions.

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Volfing, Annette: Linguistic Impairment and Mystical Status – The Revelations of Margaretha Ebner

The Revelations of the fourteenth-century Dominican nun Margaretha Ebner provide a detailed account of chronic illness: the narrator is bed-ridden for more than half the time and experiences a wide range of intermittent, yet debilitating, symptoms: headaches, toothache, paralysis, ‘swelling up’, and sweating. Most striking, however, is a pattern of linguistic impairment whereby enforced silence (presented a specific paralysis of the tongue) alternates with uncontrollable laughter and shouting. All these symptoms are closely tied to the liturgical cycle. They are also crucial to the narrator’s religious identity: she claims that she has no sense of her own self before the onset of her illness and therefore cannot write about that earlier phase of her life. Her symptoms, which testify to her elect status, necessitate various adjustments to everyday life (including liturgical practice) and constitute a challenge for other nuns (who have to carry her or restrain her).

The paper will examine the presentation of chronic illness in the Revelations from two angles: (i) the gender aspects of constrained speech and (ii) the impact of the narrator’s highly disruptive symptoms (especially the shouting) on the liturgical life of the convent. Overall, her illness is represented an empowering alterity that both affirms and resists the cultural homogenization of convent life.

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