

## Fox, Chatterjee Offer Perspectives for Understanding

Two 2003-2004 Educational Foundation Fellows spoke during the Convention Educational Foundation Luncheon. Ann Fox, a Postdoctoral Fellow, is conducting research on disability the 20th century American stage. She teaches English literature at Davidson College. Sudeshna Chatterjee, an International Fellow, is a native of India. She is an architect studying and conducting research on community and environmental design at N.C. State University.

*In Search of Fabulous Invalids: Seeking Out Disability on the Twentieth-Century American Stage...And Why It Matters.* Points from her talk:

ANN FOX USED Laura Wingfield, from Tennessee Williams's 1945 play *The Glass Menagerie*, who had polio, as an example of a disabled person in American drama. Wingfield's self-consciousness about her [slight] limp...is the catalyst for and symbol of her isolation from the world...who remains alone at play's end. We wonder whether her image, like the glass animals she collects in the play, has any utility for us at all...it seems a troubling representation of womanhood and disability, if the inevitable fate of difference is ultimately retreat from the world."

"Things have changed in the real life the play stages," Fox stated, then asked, "Why study disability:

- "At a time when medical advances seem to imply that ours is a society on the way to eradicating illness and impairment?
- "As its own culture seeking acknowledgement and rights when we are living in the age of the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, when classrooms are mainstreamed, and there is access for disabled people in ways not possible at the time Williams wrote his play?"
- "In drama...when theater seems outmoded by so many other forms of entertainment?"

Fox also asked, "Of what possible use is it for you, as university women, to spend part of your valuable time contemplating disability...?"

### Complex, conflicted interdisciplinary field

- Disability studies are analogous to and influenced by women's studies, African-American studies, lesbian and gay studies, and other academic subfields that have moved to understand the histories and contributions of diverse communities relegated to the margins of scholarship as to the margins of society.
  - Disability is not merely a condition, but a culture, with its own history, perspectives, and stories to be told.
  - Disability is a socially-constructed identity, not determined by the inherent inferiority of an impaired body, but by socially-created beliefs and assumptions about who does and does not belong based on their body's deviation from what is regarded as 'normal.'
- "Definitions of normalcy are historically determined, and change over time, just like ideas about gender and race. These attitudes surround us, and are encoded in our architecture, our art, our schools, and our workplaces, and the extent to which they are designed (or not) to accommodate the differences of disabled people...the largest minority population in the country. Disability is a common identity that connects across other identities; and because some of us are disabled, could become disabled at any moment, know or love someone who has a disability, or are on the way ourselves to becoming disabled by virtue of the aging process."

Fox became involved with disability studies seven years ago, while teaching at Washington University in St. Louis. She worked with a local political theater company called The DisAbility Project, and "was amazed to realize that

disability was an important identity I had overlooked. The people in the theater company wrote and performed scenes about disabled life in all its vicissitudes; work, sex, family, love, illness, access, shopping, hospitalization...in short, they talked about their complex, full lives. They were neither inspirational nor tragic, but rather, uppity, fierce, and funny... like everyone else." She continued, "Their disabilities were both visible and invisible, and varied widely: chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, AIDS, cancer, paraplegia, quadriplegia, stroke, amputeeism, meningitis, deafness, blindness, cystic fibrosis, alcoholism, and [others]...the power in their performance came from their being able to "stare back," to tell their own stories, and not have them be silenced behind institutional walls or mediated through sentimental or inspirational rhetoric. It came from presenting their bodies as sources for alternative visions of movement and ways of being in the world."

Fox turned to disability studies when she came to Davidson College in 1999, because she found the exploration of representation a challenge.

As an English professor, her specialty is dramatic literature. She teaches modern drama, feminist theater, and multicultural theater. "While I love theater for itself, I also recognize it as a way to teach students to understand how the world around them creates meaning," she said. "And while disability studies had commenced in popular culture, literature, and film, no one had yet really considered the disabled body in traditional drama. While we are not a largely theater-going culture today, it is important to remember that for much of our history the stage has been a central source of visual representation in American life, where many of our cultural conversations were quite literally acted out."

The AAUW American Fellowship enabled Fox to have the time to consider her questions at length, read extensively, and immerse herself in a journey toward answering them. She can be reached at [anfox@davidson.edu](mailto:anfox@davidson.edu) or PO Box 6943, Davidson 28035-6943, 704.895.7476 home; 704.894.2254 office.

*A Place for Childhood: Defining a framework for child-friendly city through developing physical environment indicators for poor communities.* Goals from this abstract explain the basis for her work:

POPULATION PREDICTIONS FORECAST AN UNAVOIDABLY urban world with an estimate of 6 of 10 children in developing countries living in cities. More than half will grow up poor by 2025. Their well-being will continue to be inextricably tied to that of the cities (UNICEF 2000).

The idea of a child-friendly city was conceived in the Mayors Defenders of Children initiative in Dakar, Senegal, 1992. It gained momentum at the Habitat II conference in Istanbul, 1996. The principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Agenda 21, and the Habitat Agenda are the international policy frameworks for conceptualizing the Child-Friendly City (CFC). This UN global initiative seeks to ensure that "city governments make decisions in the



Above: Sudeshna Chatterjee, EF Fellow; a guest; Mary Jo Pribble, EF chair and former AAUW NC president; Ann Fox, EF Fellow; and Magdalena Maiz-Pena, former EF Fellow. PHOTO BY JOANNE HILL

Right: AAUW NC outgoing President Laura Rumbley listens to Evelyn Mercer, convention chair and Charlotte Branch past-president.

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Left: Beth Messersmith, Democracy N.C., left, and Karla Atkinson, incoming secretary, listen to Gloria Blanton, former AAUW NC president. Mary Peterson presents a certificate to retired legislators Ruth Easterling, seated, and Bertha "B" Holt. PHOTOS BY JOANNE HILL



best interests of children, and that cities are places where children's rights to a healthy, caring, protective, educative, stimulating, non-discriminating, inclusive, culturally rich environment are addressed" (Riggio, 2002).

CFC's goals are abstract. Because they are not based on well-documented research, they can be interpreted in different ways. The minimum the goals recommend, like CRC, is a access to healthcare, food security, a safe environment, and basic education for every child. These goals offer little in terms of actual guidelines for creating a child-friendly city based on how the physical environment—buildings, streets, parks, landscaping—affects the well-being of children.

The indicators for health, protection, education, stimulation, non-discrimination, inclusion, and cultural richness as codified in all the seminal human rights instruments such as CRC, Agenda 21, or Habitat Agenda do not include the physical living environment as a variable. Currently, we have no valid instrument for evaluating the child-friendliness of a place from the perspective of improving the quality of the living environment through planning and design. Evidence-based research is needed to develop strategies for inventing design policies and principles to make CFC goals become reality—a sustainable living environment for children and youth.

Chatterjee's dissertation proposes to develop a set of indicators based on the CFC goals and measure the child friendliness of a typical small town in a fast-urbanizing country such as India.

She will apply existing empirical and rights-based emancipatory literature to the goals, then validate her findings by conducting pilot studies in low-income communities in the United States and India. This will be followed by using grounded theory research to account for and highlight the culture and context-specific variations during the detailed scale construction phase in the context of a small town in India.

The process for arriving at a contextual set of indicators will be emphasized as much as the indicators themselves. This study will help to define the concept of child-friendliness through grounded field research, and provide methodological inputs for investigating the most critical variables related to a child-friendly place from an environmental design perspective.

Chatterjee can be reached at 2339 Champion Court, Raleigh 28606, 919.523.6319 home; 919.515.8345 office.

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