For this LARC project, I will be conducting research in the burgeoning field of early modern disability studies. While contemporary disability studies has thrived over the past twenty years, disability as a conceptual category of difference in pre-modern contexts has gone relatively unexplored. Many scholars have suggested, mistakenly, that the systems of categorization and stigmatization that inform our contemporary ideas about disability appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Recent scholarship has demonstrated, however, that “disabled” was indeed an operational identity category in both the medieval and Renaissance eras. This new work in pre- and early modern disability studies attempts, therefore, to rescue non-normative narratives out of critical conversations that have often overlooked or misidentified disability in its important historical contexts. Exploring disability through a focus on Renaissance representations of non-standard bodies and minds, this new field asks: how were disabled individuals represented in their respective cultures, both real and fictional? How did early modern investments in the “able” body construct the “disabled” body as their oppositional term? What traditions relating to disability did pre-modern writers inherit from the various theological, political, medical, and legal injunctions of the classical period? Finally, what early modern views on disability inform our contemporary moment?

Working to further solidify early modern disability studies as a vital field of inquiry, I will spend the summer on a project that applies contemporary disability theory to the work of Renaissance poet John Milton; I plan to research and write a journal article that focuses on his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, in order to rethink the poem as a narrative about the construction of “normal” in the late seventeenth century. More specifically, I hope to re-envision *Paradise Lost* as a radical critique of an early modern cultural imagination that increasingly mandated ability as it conceived of disability as imperfection from which individuals needed salvation. This essay will serve as part of a larger book project that focuses, for the first time, on representations of disability across English Renaissance literature. Pushing further than William Shakespeare’s specific engagement with the topic (something I took up in a 2009 issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly*), the book looks beyond Shakespeare so as to provide a more coherent and cohesive view not simply of how the early modern English stage engaged embodied difference, but how a wider Western literary tradition has broached the issue. Doing so democratizes the artistic exceptionalism that frequently serves as an unfair groundwork in the study of Shakespeare and undoes a problematic tendency to superpraise his work while ignoring that of his contemporaries both in England and across Europe at the time.

I plan to collaborate with Sarah Greiner (junior, English/WGS) who will participate in our project in various ways. In her own engagement with Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, she will undertake archival work in Renaissance literature, history, and culture as well as reading in queer theory and gender and disability studies. Her work on the construction of pre-modern gender identity as it is narrated in Milton’s poem—especially in the character of Eve—mirrors, both methodologically and theoretically, my own interest in premodern identity histories, especially those deemed “non-normative,” “non-standard,” or “abnormal” and made visible as such in early modern English literature.