

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: ABLE-BODIED WOMANHOOD: DISABILITY TROPES AND CORPOREALLY EXCLUSIONARY NARRATIVES IN THE RHETORIC OF BLACK AND WHITE WOMEN'S RIGHTS DISCOURSES, 1832-1932

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This project is a feminist disability rhetorical analysis of US black and white women's rights movements from 1832-1932. Guided by Disability and Feminist Theory, it works to identify the presence and use of patterns of disability tropes in women's rights discourses. From Lucretia Coffin Mott to Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Mary Church Terrell, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Addie Hunton, this project interrogates the rhetorical work of dominant narratives and lesser known voices in women's rights discourses. I argue that early black and white women's rights advocates often utilized and repeated a disability rhetoric that relied on disability metaphor, narrative prosthesis, and corporeally exclusionary narratives in order to construct definitions of womanhood. Their insistence on cognitive ability as a marker of "fitness" and "ability" provided the foundation for rights arguments based on ableist assumptions of autonomy and citizenship. I also argue that this use of disability rhetoric relied on and furthered a pervasive ableist ideology present not only in many of these movements, but in US society. In the process, US black and white women's rights discourses have continually elided women with disabilities from women's rights discourses because their

bodies (physically, cognitively, and/or psychologically) did not meet the ableist prerequisites set for claiming women's rights during this time period.

ABLE-BODIED WOMANHOOD: DISABILITY AND CORPOREALLY  
EXCLUSIONARY NARRATIVES IN BLACK AND WHITE WOMEN'S RIGHTS  
DISCOURSES, 1832-1932

by

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## DEDICATION

For women with disabilities whose voices and rights have been denied for too long

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Dad, for supporting me, even when you didn't agree with my decisions

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## ABBREVIATIONS

CENs	Corporeally Exclusionary Narratives
DoS	Declaration of Sentiments
NACW	National Association of Colored Women
NAWSA	National American Woman Suffrage Association

## Chapter One: Introduction

*All known theories of human rights, whether based on humanity, social contract theory, utilitarianism, or citizenship, exclude individuals from the rights-bearing community if they do not possess the specific abilities required for membership. [...] understand that the human-rights discourse will never break free from the ideology of ability until it includes disability as a defining characteristic of human beings.*

*Moreover, the practice of granting rights to only those people capable of demonstrating a prescribed level of physical and mental ability must be swept away if being human is to serve as a universal standard for political membership. Basing human rights on disability, however, presents a more minimum standard for universality.<sup>1</sup>*

### **The Political is Personal: Claiming a Feminist Disability Position in Scholarship**

My disability identity is not a visible one, unless you count my facial scarring. But I never did. Others, however, have perceived my scars as a disability – a visible one. When I was sixteen, I worked at the local Kmart as a register operator and as a customer service representative. One afternoon, after I had called all of the department representatives up to the front to pick up their returned items, I turned to see a customer standing at my register. As I was about to address her, she called out in horror, “Oh my God, Honey, you’ve got a humongous scratch on your face!” I started grabbing at my face, hands everywhere, and yelled out, “Where? Where?” The guy who worked in the Sports Department burst out in laughter, and the woman walked away mortified. In order to deal with the embarrassment these episodes caused me, I enacted a sarcastic humor to deal with people who were obnoxious about the visibility of my scars. By the time I turned sixteen, I had had enough practice.

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1. T. Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008) 178 and 180, respectively.

After all, I had already been called Frankenstein on the recess blacktop at age twelve, and responded with, “My scars might make me ugly, but God made you ugly on purpose!” And, I would continue to encounter adults who not only felt the need to remind me that my scars existed, but to provide me with advice such as “If I were you, sweetheart, I would definitely have plastic surgery on those scars.”

These experiences do not constitute a disability identity, however, because according to the definition of disability outlined in the *Americans with Disabilities Act*:

To be protected by the ADA, one must have a disability or have a relationship or association with an individual with a disability. An individual with a disability is defined by the ADA as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment. The ADA does not specifically name all of the impairments that are covered.<sup>2</sup>

My scars have never “substantially limited” major life activities, even if I have been “perceived by others as having such an impairment.” While many people have perceived my scars as a disability, my greater disability struggles have actually been and continue to be invisible. And, when those invisible disabilities are in full swing, my life — socially, academically, and professionally—can often cease to function. While a physical disability may be easier for people to understand, my psychological disability is not visible, and is often greatly misunderstood, ignored, or devalued as a disability identity that warrants understanding and flexibility. Choosing to reveal myself as someone who

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2. “A Guide to Disability Rights Laws,” *ADA.gov*. ADA, July 2009 update. Web. 1 January 2016.

struggles with a psychological disability could be dangerous, particularly in the world of academia, where the mind is considered to be integral to the work. To do so here is not a choice I make lightly; I do so in order to place myself within the context of my own research and graduate experiences.

Throughout my graduate career, I've encountered academic colleagues whose stringent focus on race, gender, class, and sexuality have not allowed for a consideration of disability as an equal axis of identity deserving of consideration, others who consistently refused to acknowledge a disability perspective in their own work even when it was integral to their arguments, and even those who refused to allow the scholarly term "queer" to be applied to people with disabilities, lest the medical model re-emerge for LGBTQ persons and re-constitute the pathologies long-attributed to the community. These types of reactions emblemized the reasons that Disability Studies scholarship has called for a recognition that ableism is still functioning as an ideology in the discursive work of many scholars, and that disability is an axis of identity that should not be elided because of its direct connection to other identity categories.

That is not to say that I have not encountered colleagues who were willing to embrace disability as an integral axis of identity, to collaboratively work and write about disability and body issues, disability and communication, and disability and immigrant experiences. For these people, I am truly grateful. Working with them served to expand my own perspectives on work that addressed other categories of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity. I am also grateful to have chosen advisors who have been not only sympathetic, but empathetic, in regards to my disability struggles throughout my graduate career.

Inspired by a graduate colleague, who is a disability ally, to explore the avenue of feminist rhetoric, I took a communications course that would completely change the direction of my dissertation. After studying rhetoric in the work of nineteenth-century white women's rights activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Clarissa Howard Nichols, and identifying an overwhelming number of references to disability in these early discourses, I could not ignore the patterns that I was seeing. Paying attention to the moments in which disability was used in the work of these women, I began to notice a more specific pattern—a pattern that included not only a reliance on disability and disability metaphor, but also a disability rhetoric that worked to support expediency arguments, and the pervasiveness of an ableist rhetoric that constructed cognitive ability as a prerequisite of responsible and acceptable womanhood. Not all women were being argued for. Because of the rhetorical constructions, steeped in disability as a negative marker of identity, women with disabilities were clearly omitted from most of these arguments.

This was when I realized my own struggle as both a feminist and a disability scholar. I was reminded of disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's call to feminist and disability scholars to recognize the possibility for critical feminist disability work that would acknowledge and tackle the ableism within women's rights and feminist activism, as well as their scholarship.<sup>3</sup> I was reminded that disclosing disability (particularly psychological and/or cognitive disability) in an academic environment could be dangerous and detrimental to my academic and/or professional

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3. R. Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," in B. G. Smith and B. Hutchison, eds. *Gendering Disability* (Newark: Rutgers State University, 2004) 73-103.

career.<sup>4</sup> And, I was reminded of the long history of women who fought against representations of cognitive and psychological disability in order to claim their own value as able-bodied citizens.<sup>5</sup> It is this history of women's rights arguments involving disability that is the foundation of this project. It is this history of argumentation, and its use of disability tropes that have constructed womanhood as able-bodied, and has limited or elided the rights of disabled women in women's rights history.

My own feminist disability identity informs this research because I have witnessed and experienced firsthand the struggle for some of the substantive rights that are so often denied to women with disabilities, particularly those with psychological or cognitive disabilities. How many times do we doubt decisions or information provided by those we know to be struggling with depression or schizophrenia or bi-polar diagnoses? How many times do I question myself about my perspective on feminist disability issues because of my own daily experiences? How often do we recognize cognitive ability as a requirement for traditional scholarly work? How have we, as a society and as scholars, privileged cognitive and psychological ability as markers of strength and autonomy? These questions have driven the research of this project, in an effort to understand how cognitive ability and able-bodiedness became such a prerequisite for feminist work.

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4. Corbett O'Toole discusses the reasons why people with disabilities often do not publicly disclose their relationship to disability in C. O'Toole, "Disclosing Our Relationships to Disabilities: An Invitation for Disability Studies Scholars," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2 2013. Web. 1 January 2016.

5. Garland-Thomson 78-79.

## **What is a Disability Rhetoric? Research Questions and Theoretical Frameworks**

This project works to explore, identify, analyze, and critique the use of disability rhetoric in support of an ableist ideology in black and white women's rights arguments from 1832-1932. My analysis considers multiple components of women's rights discourses. First, I identify the rhetoric, defined simply as persuasive language, within the movements. The second part of the analysis involves the interrogation of the use of metaphor within the rhetorical works. Third, this project works to expose the ideological underpinnings implicit in the use of metaphor within each of the works. Finally, this project has served to identify the disability tropes constructed by women's rights advocates, particularly those tropes that have lingered well into the twenty-first century, reinforcing negative notions of disability and stifling the rights of disabled women, and/or women perceived as disabled.

My primary research questions fall into four categories which are often inseparable in both black and white women's rights discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: rhetoric and disability, metaphor and disability, ideology and ableism, and disability tropes and patterns.

### ***Rhetoric and Disability:***

According to Gerard A Hauser, rhetoric is not accidental. It is intentional. Its intention is to coordinate social action. This happens when "one person engages another in an exchange of symbols to accomplish some goal."<sup>6</sup> Part of this exchange is an intentional managing and usage of the symbols in any rhetorical discourse, verbal or

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6. G. A. Hauser, *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory*. Second edition (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 2002) 3.

written. The particular symbol that I explore in early women's rights discourses is that of disability as articulated via impairment, disease, illness, etc. Hauser also views rhetoric as an action and breaks down rhetorical action into multiple categories, including: symbolic, social, strategic, and constitutive. My research questions mimic Hauser's, and arise from these types of actions:

1. Social: How are symbols being managed in women's rights discourses in order to influence people's perceptions of their situations or realities? *Or, how is disability, or a disability-related term, such as disease, illness, impairment as a symbol, being managed in women's rights discourses in order to influence people's perceptions of their situations or realities?*
2. Strategic: How is the rhetoric being used to help the speaker set goals and frame messages to meet her goals? *Or, how is disability or a disability related term being used in the rhetoric to help the speaker set goals and frame messages to meet her goals?*
3. Constitutive: How is the rhetoric being used to create a reality, a particular world with values, ethical standards, norms, etc.?<sup>7</sup> *Or, how is disability or a disability related terms being used in the rhetoric to create and reinforce an able-bodied reality, a particular world with able-bodied values, ethical standards, norms, etc.?*<sup>8</sup>

These questions guide my interaction with black and white women's rights discursive texts, and allow for an interrogation of the use of disability or disability related terms

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7. Hauser 8-11.

8. All questions in Italics mine.

within the rhetoric of these works —a rhetoric that engaged disability (impairment, disease, illness) on multiple levels, whether literally or figuratively, and worked to construct not only meaning for women’s rights arguments, but an able-bodied reality that elided women with disabilities from those very same sets of rights arguments.<sup>9</sup>

***Metaphor and Disability:***

My research questions about metaphor continued the focus on those questions articulated above, but ask more specifically about the use of disability or disability related terms as a metaphor and whether or not the figurative use of these terms was one that is negative or positive. Questions such as: Are disability or disability related terms being used in a literal or figurative manner? If it is being used as a metaphor, what is it being compared to and how? Is the comparison positive or negative in nature?

According to disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, when disability is used as a negative metaphor, the assumptions are that a disabled body is a problem that needs to be fixed.<sup>10</sup> To be crippled, literally or metaphorically, is a problem

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9. My perspective on rhetoric was also influenced by rhetorical scholar Stephen Howard Browne’s work on Angelina Grimke. In S. Browne, *Angelina Grimke: Rhetoric, Identity, and the Radical Imagination* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999), Browne argued for the violence of rhetoric. He invokes the work of Dickson Bruce regarding southern oratory, claiming that “violence can be an effective way to express certain assumptions about life and the world” and that “rhetoric is taken in specific circumstances to be itself a form of violence.” Following this path of logic, I believe we can read the rhetorical constructions of nineteenth and twentieth century feminists as moments of violent expression from which we can extract their “assumptions about life and world,” including social views on gender, race, sexuality, and disability. Browne claimed that Grimke “understood not only that change required violence, but that desirable change required the ability to read violence in optimal ways.” Browne also claimed that “violence disorders, and in disordering it calls into question the structures of commitment through which communities define themselves.” Following Browne’s philosophy of violence, I will use this framework to question the power of “violence” in the work of nineteenth and twentieth century women’s movement activists.

10. D. Mitchell and S. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

that must be solved. The use of terms associated with disability (paralysed<sup>11</sup>, crippled, retarded, etc....) as metaphorical examples linked with problems or complaints inscribe the terms with a negative connotation and result in linking impairment or disability with something that is to be eschewed, avoided, or fixed, rather than something that is positive and productive. Mitchell and Snyder's work provides a framework for questioning and discussing disability metaphors and the use of disability as a prosthetic tool in multiple forms of discourse, including speech, writing, and performance. Mitchell and Snyder further point out that:

[W]hile disability's troubling presence provides literary works with the potency of an unsettling cultural commentary, disabled people have been historically refused a parallel power within their social institutions. In other words, while literature often relies on disability's transgressive potential [as a metaphor], disabled people have been sequestered, excluded, exploited, and obliterated on the very basis of which their literary representation so often rests.<sup>12</sup>

Choices to employ disability metaphor in rhetorical strategy not only demonstrate the attitudes and beliefs of nineteenth-century US society in regards to perceived and actual physical disability, but also reinforce the ideology of ability and the notion that disability, disease, and impairments were problems that must be fixed in order for society to be productive and for individuals to fulfill their own potential.

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11. Older texts spell paralyze with an s, paralyse, which is how I will use it in this text to refer to these women's work.

12. Mitchell and Snyder 8.

### ***Ableist Rhetoric and Ideology:***

The last of my research questions focuses on how the women's use of disability metaphor and disability related language worked to establish and reinforce ableist ideologies and norms within women's rights discursive texts from 1832 – 1932. Again, I am guided by Hauser's signpost questions, as I question the constitutive qualities of disability in women's rights rhetoric and the ableist ideology that it constructed and reinforced, I also question how the use of disability, literal or figurative, worked to eliminate particular female bodies from women's rights arguments. Additionally, I began to question whether the use of disability related language within women's rights movements' rhetoric would continue to resurface over time and form patterns that would develop into tropes because of their consistent and continued usage over two centuries of women's rights argumentation.

Some of the questions that arise are: Does the rhetoric assume an able-bodiedness among women? Does the rhetoric assume that normal is natural? Does the rhetoric value normalcy? Does the rhetoric construct deviance as something bad? According to James Cherney, if the answers to these questions is "yes," then:

It [the rhetoric] works by deploying the idea of the normal body as a fact of nature, thereby absolving responsibility for employing it in medical, scientific, political, and religious institutions. According to this norm, valuing normal bodies and devaluing "abnormal" bodies reflects sensible awareness of the way things naturally work instead of employing questionable ideology.<sup>13</sup>

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13. J. Cherney, "The Rhetoric of Ableism," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 31 No. 3 (2011). Web. 1 Jan 2016.

Questions regarding the use of disability rhetoric and its power to construct and reinforce an able-bodied ideology within women's rights movements were crucial because, according to Cherney:

[...] focusing on ableism as rhetoric makes rhetorical responses more attractive. Political rhetoric seems much less empty when one understands that the problems confronted are also rhetorical in nature. The problem is not that deviance is bad, it is that ableism teaches seeing it that way. The problem is not that being abnormal is unnatural, it is that ableism teaches valuing normalcy that way. The problem is not that ability resides in the body, and that a body with different skills is inherently unable to function in society, it is that ableism teaches knowing ability that way.<sup>14</sup>

In order to unearth the ideologically constitutive powers of a disability rhetoric in black and white women's rights movements, questions about the rhetoric, its use of disability, its underlying messages, and its continued usage are integral to this project. As Cherney claims, "Identifying ableism requires rhetorical invention, for to critique a rhetoric that goes without saying requires new words."<sup>15</sup> In order to critique the disability rhetoric of this time period, it first has to be identified and named, and its continued usage over time must be recognized in order to completely understand the ramifications of such language and rhetoric on the lives of women with disabilities, and/or women perceived to be disabled.

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14. Cherney

15. Cherney

### ***Disability Tropes and Patterns:***

The repetition of particular uses of disability terminology within women's rights argumentation has constructed a pattern or trope of disability and/or ableism that has worked to ignore the rights of women with disabilities, while arguing for the rights of "all" women. Most women's rights rhetors were not using the term "disabled" in nineteenth or early twentieth century discourses, but they were using disability related terms, such as impairment, disease, illness, crippled, paralysed, enervated, idiocy, lunacy, etc. As the term disability did not exist in its current meaning until the latter part of the twentieth century, my reference to their use of these terms as the use of disability or disability related terms in rhetoric is a means of understanding past rhetorical patterns from a modern perspective. For this reason, the term disability and the specific instances of disability (referenced above) may become intertwined within this project. Where a specific instance of disability is used by a rhetor, I will acknowledge it as such, but also work to articulate its importance to a modern understanding of disability rhetoric and the tropes that it has functioned to promote in women's rights rhetorical work.

This project has unearthed a number of tropes resulting from nineteenth century women's rights discourses. These tropes follow a variety of patterns: 1) claiming social disability while also rejecting a disability status because it was a marker of inferiority, 2) independence/autonomy as a foil to disability, 3) disability as a scare tactic in expediency arguments, and 4) naming others as disabled in order to gain rights. All of these tropes share a belief in disability as negative ontology and disability as negative epistemology. The disabled, diseased, or impaired body was undesirable and represented a body as

inherently problematic and those who were disabled were not only considered undesirable, but deviant, distrusted, and dependent.

These tropes have not only continued to be used throughout women's rights rhetoric in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but have often been coupled with one another and expanded, in order to classify groups of undesirables as disabled, resulting, intentionally or unintentionally, in the exclusion of women with disabilities from claiming full citizenship rights, whether legislative or substantive.

***Additional Theoretical Underpinnings:***

While one might expect that I would use the lens of feminist theory as the starting point for this project, feminist theory alone could not account for the rhetorical choices in early black and white women's rights discursive texts. Inspired by Avery Gordon's call to look for the "ghosts" of the past, I endeavor to locate and name the "ghosts" of feminist rhetoric, and not to create "ghosts" of my own in the process.<sup>16</sup> The "ghosts" in this particular project have turned out to be the use of disability tropes within women's rights arguments – tropes that emerged time and time again in the rhetoric of women's rights advocates from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and are still present in twenty first century feminist work.

Integral to this work is black feminist theory which argues for a greater understanding about feminist identity and how a black feminist experience contends with interlocking systems of oppression (race and gender) that many white women do not have to face (Frances Beale, bell hooks, Pat Hill-Collins, and Barbara Smith), but I also

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16. A. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997).

consider disability as an integral systemic and institutional oppression that is often ignored or overlooked in the process of analyzing women's identities and experiences.<sup>17</sup>

Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, Alison Wylie, Allison Jaggar, and Pat Hill-Collins have all engaged standpoint theory as integral to feminist work because of its power to acknowledge the epistemologies that come from the material experiences of marginalized peoples, as well as recognizing, analyzing and drawing on power/knowledge relations.<sup>18</sup> But, even or especially because much of the work addresses the field of science, their work does not include women with disabilities as a marginalized peoples whose epistemologies provide a particular feminist perspective on the structures of power.

Finally, Kimberly Crenshaw, Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth Zambrana, and Candace West and Jill Fenstermaker have argued for an intersectional approach to identity, one that focused on race, gender, and class as simultaneous experiences that overlap and constitute one another. West and Fenstermaker articulated the difficulties with intersectional theory that saw differing axes of identity as “additive or multiplicative,” and concluded that each category of identity was inseparable from the

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17. F. Beale, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” in T. Cade, ed. *The Black Woman*, (New York: Signet 1970); b. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981); P. Hill Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” *Signs*, 14.4 (1989): 745–773; B. Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” *The Radical Teacher*, 7 (1978): 20–27.

18. S. Harding, “Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate,” in S. Harding, ed. *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2004); N. Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism.” in S. Harding, ed. (2004); A. Wylie, “Why Standpoint Matters.” In R. Figueroa and S. Harding, eds, *Science and Other Cultures: Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology*, (New York: Routledge, 2003); A. M. Jaggar, “Feminist Politics and Epistemology: The Standpoint of Women,” in S. Harding, ed (2004); P. Hill-Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist thought,” in S. Harding, ed (2004) and *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2001).

others (i.e., every social exchange is simultaneously “raced,” gendered, and “classed”). Additionally, they challenged intersectional theory that saw categories of identity as fixed and inflexible. Definitions of gender have changed over time, thus, an intersectional theory has to account for the multiplicity of gender identities, as well as those of race and class.<sup>19</sup> Where intersectional theory has failed people with disabilities is in its exclusion of disability from its categories of intersection, and the role that disability has played in constructing particular races, genders, and classes as deviant and inferior, creating a system of oppression that has disability as its foundation.

Looking to feminist rhetorical theory, I discovered the work of Karen A Foss, Sonja K Foss, and Cindy L Griffin. In their book titled, *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*, these collaborating authors clearly articulate their desire to see rhetoric in new ways, particularly through the perspectives of feminists.<sup>20</sup> Their opening quote challenges feminist to “re-visualize” rhetorical theory. But, utilizing such language as inspiration for their own work demonstrates that feminist rhetorical theory continues to rely on ableist metaphors to talk about the possibilities of rhetoric and rhetorical analysis. What of those who cannot “visualize” in a traditional capacity, are they then able to re-visualize? Whether the ableist language is intentional or unintentional, language matters and our choices of words create possibilities and limitations regardless of what discourse we are

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19. K. Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” In M.A. Fineman and R. Mykitiuk, eds, *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, (New York: Routledge, 1994) 93-118; B. Thornton Dill and R. Zambrana, “Critical Thinking About Inequality: An Emerging Lens,” in B. Thornton Dill and R. Zambrana, eds, *Emerging Intersections: Race, Class, and Gender in Theory, Policy, and Practice*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009) 1–21; C. West and S. Fenstermaker, “Doing Difference,” *Gender & Society*, February 1995 vol. 9 no. 1: 8-37.

20. K. A. Foss, S. K. Foss, and C. L. Griffin, *Feminist Rhetorical Theories* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1999). This book was originally published in 1999 and reissued in paperback in 2006. No subsequent manuscripts have addressed feminist rhetorical theory in a comprehensive manner since.

participating in. Assumptions of able-bodiedness were still present in a feminist rhetorical theory that called for a “re-vision” and an intersectional approach to feminist rhetorical theory. Still, what Foss, Foss, and Griffin articulate about female experiences and their ability to inform theory and construct rhetoric is integral to this project.

Finally, I rely heavily on disability theory to guide a critique of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women’s rights movements, particularly the work which engaged women’s bodies. In “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls for a feminist disability perspective and recognizes that feminist must account for disability, but also that disability scholars must account for feminist perspectives. According to Garland-Thomson:

The most sophisticated and nuanced analyses of disability, in my view, comes from scholars conversant with feminist theory. And the most completing and complex analyses of gender intersectionality take into consideration what I call the ability/disability system—along with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class.<sup>21</sup>

Garland-Thomson clearly articulates what she believes the goal of feminist disability studies should be when she sets the agenda for future work “[...] to augment the terms and confront the limits of the ways we understand human diversity, the materiality of the body, multiculturalism, and the social formations that interpret bodily differences.”<sup>22</sup>

This project engages Garland-Thomson’s theory of feminist disability work in a number of ways. First, this project works to disrupt the assumption that disability is something

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21. Garland-Thomson 78-79.

22. Garland-Thomson 78.

that is wrong with someone. Second, this project acknowledges that the female body has often been used as a site to name the non-normative. Third, this project works to “highlight intersections and convergences with other identity-based critical perspectives,”<sup>23</sup> such as race and class. Finally, this project strives to enact a feminist disability scholarship that “facilitates a fuller integration of the socio-political world — for the benefit of everyone. As with gender, race, sexuality, and class: to understand how disability operates is to understand what it is to be fully human.”<sup>24</sup>

In *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers’s insistence on recognizing people with disabilities as minorities is also necessary to my work because it clearly articulates the possibility for moving beyond people with disabilities as just another group in the battle of identity politics.<sup>25</sup> His work also claims people with disabilities as a minority population that is unique in the fact that every citizen could/would eventually be able to claim this identity, making this oppressed group one that could force a recognition of the culturally constructed norms that are currently in place in society. Siebers’s work lays out the heart of the problem with the use of rhetorics of exclusion as they manifested themselves in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>26</sup> Any human rights argument could require standards of ability as a marker of fitness or rights for citizenship. Unless those fighting for rights eliminated the “prescribed level[s] of physical and mental ability” as part of their arguments for the fitness of their own group, no argument would

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23. Garland-Thomson 79.

24. Garland-Thomson 79.

25. Siebers

26. This is what I refer to as corporeally exclusionary narratives (CENs) and will be defined in a later section of this introduction.

ever be free of corporeally exclusionary narratives and no argument would ever succeed in providing rights to all peoples. I am also guided by Siebers's claim that the unfit designation is often based in arguments of physical or mental inferiority, or disability. He articulates that we must recognize that disability has served as the primary metaphor for the abject. It is at the heart of all exclusionary discourses, whether they are race-, gender-, class-, or sexuality-based.

Fiona Kumari Campbell's theoretical work, *Contours of Ableism*, defines ableism as:

A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is case as a diminished state of being human.<sup>27</sup>

Her work also argues that, "It is not possible to have a concept of difference without ableism."<sup>28</sup> This projects works under the theory that difference (in body) has been constructed by disability, and combines this philosophy with the work of Douglas Baynton, who has argued that disability (difference) has historically been the justification used for inequality.<sup>29</sup> Together, a system and set of beliefs, ableism, exists within a society that views disability/difference as inherently negative and problematic. Her earlier work, "Legislating Disability – Negative Ontologies and the Government of Legal

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27. F. Kumari Campbell, "Inciting legal fictions: Disability's date with ontology and the ableist body of the law," *Griffith Law Review* (Vol 10: 2001): 44 quoted in F. Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Aabledness* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009). 5.

28. Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism* 6.

29. D. Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in P. K. Longmore and L. Umansky, eds, *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) 33-57.

Identities,” clearly articulates the struggle within rights movements, regarding disabled bodies:

Activists with disabilities have placed great trust in the legal system to deliver freedoms in the form of equality rights and protections against discrimination. While these equalization initiatives have provided remedies in the lives of some individuals with disabilities, their subtext of disability as negative ontology has remained substantially unchallenged.<sup>30</sup>

Taking Campbell’s charge to heart, this project tackles the negative ontologies in the subtext of early black and white women’s rights movements, not just in order to identify them, but to analyze their construction through the use of disability, disability metaphor, and ableist ideology.

Finally, this project relies on the theory of narrative prosthesis presented by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. The problem(s) of narrative prosthesis and disability metaphor may not be readily apparent to some, but disability studies scholars Mitchell and Snyder discuss the problematic employment of both. Their explication of what they term *narrative prosthesis* merits quoting at length:

First, narrative prosthesis refers to the pervasiveness of disability as a device of characterization in narrative art [...]

Second, it enables a contrast between the prosthetic leanings of mainstream discourses that would disguise or obliterate the evidence of

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30. F. Kumari Campbell, “Legislating Disability – Negative Ontologies and the Government of Legal Identities,” in S. Tremain, *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 109.

physical and cognitive differences, and literary efforts that expose prosthesis as an artificial, and thus, resignifiable relation [...]

Finally, it acknowledges that literary representation bears on the production and realization of disabled subjectivities.<sup>31</sup>

Mitchell and Snyder identify multiple ways in which the term narrative prosthesis connects the literary or verbal and the historical, arguing that it is important to recognize disability's place in discursive work, along with its social context. Identifying the use of disability metaphor and narrative prosthesis at play in the work of these nineteenth and twentieth century women's rights rhetors allows us as contemporary scholars to acknowledge that people's physical disabilities were often viewed as connected to their character, specifically the result of bad character or as a visible punishment from God. This use of narrative prosthesis also performed the work of disguising the material reality of disability by using the disability as a metaphoric construction, rather than addressing the reality of physical difference in society. Most importantly for the work of this paper, narrative prosthesis acknowledges that these rhetorical works have an impact on society's construction and reinforcement of disability as abject and the dependency discourse(s) surrounding disabled bodies.

Mitchell and Snyder's work was also integral to the identification of disability tropes present in the discourses of women's rights advocates. Coupled with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work on disability and representation, it allowed for an identification of narrative prosthesis and the use of disability metaphor that was repetitive and continued over the course of multiple women's rights arguments, among many women's

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31. Mitchell and Snyder 8.

rights groups. These patterns (tropes) provide exemplar of Mitchell and Snyder's argument that the use of disability in discursive work has an impact on society's perception of disability; and, subsequently, that they have an impact on rights argumentation rhetoric and the people who are/are not being argued for.

### **Sources and Methods**

For this project, I have chosen to engage with some of public work of white and black women's rights activists from 1832-1932. The selection of texts was driven by the following requirements:

- It should be printed material (including public text, whether it was a speech that was transcribed, a published journal, or a published essay or pamphlet).
- It should be arguing for women's rights.
- It should contain disability or a disability reference (disease, cripple, paralyse, etc.).
- The author should be a significant figure/voice within black or white women's rights movements.
- It should be accessible (available online, digitally, in hard copy, microfilm or microfiche via university, public or private libraries and archives that allow access to materials, and within reasonable traveling distance).

I chose to engage public texts because these texts would have had a greater audience and would have had the ability to influence a greater number of people.<sup>32</sup> I have also chosen

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32. The power of speech in this time period is particularly important because there were so many people who were not literate – unable to read or write. Public speeches and public texts would be read aloud, providing an opportunity for many people to hear these texts and to be influenced by them. The

public texts because they would have been more likely to reach male and female, black and white, audiences. My selection was also driven by the content of the texts. Texts had to be arguing for women's rights, not just discussing the role of women or giving womanly advice. Finally, my use of texts produced by authors who were significant to their own movements (whether black or white) came from the possibility of unearthing new narratives in work that has already been analyzed and critiqued by feminist and race scholars. Additionally, the work of leaders within the movement would have been most influential in creating the platforms for each phase of the movements, and would have informed the arguments of those men and women that would follow.

Additionally, it was important to me to choose examples that may not necessarily stand out as obvious examples of the rhetorical strategies being enacted, as some lesser-known works, such as the NAWSA minutes and Josie B. Hall's *Mental and Moral Capsule*, have been effective in demonstrating the ideological construction at play in the building of arguments that were fighting against other (male) ideological forces. These examples, when deconstructed, reveal the underlying social acceptance of discrimination against any body that did not meet the norms set out for citizenship and the power of language to construct those bodies as unacceptable.

The seminal works that began this project were those included in collections of women's rights and feminist speeches and essays. The works I originally examined were those of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Maria Miller Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Mary Church Terrell. The work of these women led to the "start date" of the century studied in this project – Maria Miller Stewart's earliest public

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requirement of finding texts in print is my own because of the lack of recordings and/or other means to study them.

work that I studied was her public speech in 1832. After engaging with these texts, I turned towards organizational materials produced by the groups that these women were affiliated with: The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). These sources led me to journals produced by the organization or by those who were part of the organization: the *Woman's Journal*, *Woman's Voice*, *The New Era*, and the *Birth Control Review*. It was from all of these sources that I located the public texts arguing for women's rights from leaders in each of the women's rights movements.<sup>33</sup> Finally, the grouping of texts studied as part of the early reproductive rights arguments and eugenics determined the end date for this project. The "Negro Issue" of the *Birth Control Review* was dated June 1932, thus the end date for the focus of this study. Thus, a century of women's rights arguments that starts in 1832 and ends in 1932 established the parameters of this work.

#### ***Method for Rhetorical Analysis:***

A close textual reading of all of the materials was necessary in order to determine where the argument originated, whether or not an expediency argument was being used, how much the argument relied on strict definitions of independence and dependence, and whether or not the writer/speaker was employing disability to make his/her point. I then deconstructed the rhetoric, pinpointing moments of each of the stylistic choices, and

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33. Collection such as: K. Kohrs Campbell, ed, *Man Cannot Speak for Her* Vol. II, (Westport: Praeger Publishing, 1989); K. Kohrs Campbell, *Women Public Speakers in the United States, 1800-1925* and *Women Public Speakers in the United States, 1925-1993*; B Guy-Sheftall, ed, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, (New York: The New Press, 1995); M. Schneir, ed. *Feminism in Our Time*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); M. Schneir, *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); S. Wilson Logan, ed. "*We Are Coming*" *The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1999); S. Wilson Logan, *With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century African-American Women*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1995).

reading these moments for the potential of the messages sent to readers/listeners— messages about citizenship, normalcy, and acceptable bodies.

My method for engaging each of the texts selected was driven by feminist rhetorical theory and methodology. Following the rhetorical analysis methods detailed by Sonja K. Foss (2009), I initially approached each discursive text through an ideological rhetorical analysis.<sup>34</sup> Foss identifies ideological criticism as that which “looks beyond the surface structure of an artifact to discover the beliefs, values, and assumptions it suggests.”<sup>35</sup> Evaluative beliefs are the heart of an ideology. These are beliefs “about which there are possible alternative judgments.”<sup>36</sup> Ideological criticism is rooted in basic beliefs about ideologies and how they function. The ideological approach would allow for an understanding of the beliefs, values, and assumptions regarding disability that were present in each of the pieces being analyzed.

Following a critical format suggested by the work of Sonja K. Foss, the initial ideological analysis was comprised of four parts:

1. identifying the presented elements of the artifact (what exactly is being said),
2. identifying the suggested elements linked to the presented elements (what are the possible meanings suggest by the presented elements),
3. formulating an ideology (grouping the suggested elements and organizing them into frameworks, using presented elements as support), and

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34. S. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism – Exploration and Practice. Fourth edition* (Longrove: Waveland Press, 2009).

35. Foss 209.

36. Foss 209.

4. identifying the functions served by the ideology (historicizing the function of the ideology for the audience encountering it and its possible consequences in the world).<sup>37</sup>

This ideological criticism was informed by structuralism and other linguistic models, particularly semiotics (science of signs).<sup>38</sup> It was also informed by poststructuralism and deconstructionism—questioned the texts, exposed underlying meanings biases, preconceptions—and then re-conceptualized the field of those texts.<sup>39</sup> The deconstruction assumed the following:

1. Multiple ideologies exist in any culture and have the potential to be manifest in rhetorical artifacts.
2. Hegemony is the privileging of one group’s ideologies over another.
3. When an ideology becomes hegemonic, it accumulates “the symbolic power to map or classify the world for others.”<sup>40</sup>
4. A dominant ideology controls what participants see as natural or obvious by establishing the norm.
5. A hegemonic ideology provides a sense that things are the way they have to be; it asserts that its meanings are the real, natural ones.<sup>41</sup>

While an ideological criticism was the initial approach taken to the texts in this project, it soon became apparent that a genre criticism (identifying a genre through

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37. Foss 209.

38. Foss 211.

39. Foss 212.

40. Stuart Hall as quoted in Foss 210.

41. Foss 210.

patterns) was necessary, in order to identify and analyze the patterns of rhetoric within the women's rights movements – patterns that were re-emerging in many of the black and white women's rights movements, regardless of their focus on rights acquisition and/or demographic make-up. Foss's fourth step in the process of an ideological critique, "identifying the functions served by the ideology (historicizing the function of the ideology for the audience encountering it and its possible consequences in the world)," took a turn towards a genre critique. As part of a genre critique, a description of the genre is necessary. According to Foss, a generic description involves four steps:

- 1) observing similarities in rhetorical responses to particular situations;
- 2) collecting artifacts that occur in similar situations
- 3) analyzing the artifacts to discover if they share characteristics; and
- 4) formulating the organizing principle of the genre

The similarities I observed in the work of early women's rights rhetors was their use of disability and/or disability related language in their rhetorical work. I worked to collect a number of artifacts from each time period and each rights argumentation focus, whether it was through the use of anthologies or discoveries in archival research. In the process of analyzing the rhetoric of the collected works, I recognized a number of shared characteristics (the patterns/tropes identified previously). Each author's use of disability metaphor, within their rhetoric, was carefully considered and interrogated, and patterns of usage emerged in the work of both black and white women. And, in the process of analysis, the organizing principle of the genre clearly identified itself as a reliance on disability and/or disability related terminology, which formed a rhetorical genre among women's rights rhetors that re-emerged over and over again across multiple centuries,

and continues to impact the rights of women/people with disabilities and/or women/people perceived as disabled.

### **Defining Terms**

This project is an ideological and generic rhetorical analysis of the use of disability in the rhetoric of early black and white women's rights movements' discourses. This author considered the historical context of each of these women rights advocates and the movements they were part of; however, the focus of this study is the rhetoric that each advocate utilized in constructing their arguments. As Gerard Hauser claimed, "rhetoric is an action" and "rhetoric is intentional." This project focuses on the rhetorical choices that each rhetor made, and recognizes the intentionality of their actions in choosing particular rhetorical devices (particularly the use of disability and disability related terminology), even while acknowledging that the outcomes and impacts of their rhetoric may not have been intentional, but are nonetheless real.

Some rhetorical and disability terminology is used in order to frame this project and allow for its focus on disability rhetoric and its constructions of the able-bodied woman. Since this terminology may not be familiar to all readers, I believe it is useful to articulate the ways in which this terminology is used throughout the project.

***Disability and Impairment:*** What disability means today is not what disability meant in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. According to historian Douglas C Baynton, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, "The metaphor of the natural versus the monstrous was a fundamental way of constructing social reality." Baynton goes on to explain:

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, the concept of the natural was to a great extent displaced or subsumed by the concept of normality. Since then, normality has been deployed in all aspects of modern life as a means of measuring, categorizing, and managing populations (and resisting such management). [...]

The natural and the normal both are ways of establishing the universal, unquestionable good and right. Both are also ways of establishing social hierarchies that justify the denial of legitimacy and certain rights to individuals or groups. Both are constituted in large part by being set in opposition to culturally variable notions of disability – just as the natural was meaningful in relation to the monstrous and the deformed, so are the cultural meanings of the normal produced in tandem with disability.<sup>42</sup>

As Baynton explains, there are “culturally variable notions of disability.” In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, an ill or deformed or abnormal body was in opposition to normality, and viewed in a negative fashion. These bodies were primarily described by what, today, we would call impairments – crippled, diseased, enervated, defective, deformed, deaf, blind, ill, etc. When we apply a disability lens to these historical references, we understand them from the perspective of a modern day disability status. Much of what exists in the rhetoric of women’s rights advocates are these specific references to impairments, which this project identifies as disability related language within a disability rhetoric. The use of a disability studies lens within this rhetorical analysis allows for a greater understanding of how impairment has been constructed by

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42. Baynton 35.

various women's rights advocates, and how those constructions of impairment have been connected to ideals of dependency, deviancy, degeneracy, and disability over time.

Sociologists and disability scholars Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer explain that, "For most of the twentieth century in 'Western' societies, disability has been equated with 'flawed minds and bodies.'"<sup>43</sup> It is not until the later part of the twentieth century that the term disability takes on its current meaning, and even that definition has changed in the last 30 years. Barnes and Mercer also discuss the individual medical model of disability (disability as defined by medicine and science) and the socio-political model (socially constructed disability). The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation constructed a statement that demonstrates the impact that our social and environmental structures have on people with disabilities:

In our view it is society which disables physically impaired people.

Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society.

Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society.<sup>44</sup>

This social construction model definition of disability is one that recognizes that people may have impairments, but disability comes from the social and environmental factors.

The revision of the American with Disabilities Act in 2008 applied this social construction theory in its amendment of the definition of disability. The updated definition is as follows:

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43. C. Barnes and G. Mercer, *Disability* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003): 1.

44. Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), *Fundamental Principles of Disability*, (London: Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976) as quoted in Barnes and Mercer 11.

An individual with a disability is defined by the ADA as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.”<sup>45</sup>

While the rhetors studied in the project did not regard or use the word disability in this context, their use of the term “disability” in claiming social and legal disabilities was still one that was negative in connotation. When I name their past references to disease, illness, etc. as examples of disability, I do so as a means of identifying their rhetorical strategies as part of a broader historical pattern of the use of disability rhetoric that elides people with disabilities from rights argumentation.

**Ableism:** Ableism, according to Fiona Kumari Campbell is, like racism, sexism, and classism, a pervasive ideological assumption of superiority based on an able-bodied status.<sup>46</sup> Ableism relies on unquestioned assumptions of able-bodiedness, just as Adrienne Rich’s work articulated a compulsory heterosexuality<sup>47</sup>, so too does Robert McGruer address ableism when he argues that heterosexuality is not the on compulsory identity, but that compulsory able-bodiedness also exists in almost all discursive work produced.<sup>48</sup> Ableism works under the following assumptions: the “natural is normal,” deviancy is bad and needs fixed, and the value of a body lies in its able-bodiedness.

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45. See Baynton

46. See Kumari Campbell *Contours*

47. A. Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs*, Vol 5, No 4, Summer, 1980, 631-660.

48. R. McGruer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in L. J. Davis, ed. *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2006) 88-99.

This project utilizes physical, cognitive, and psychological ableism in order to discuss the different types of ableism that underlay black and white women's rights arguments from 1832-1932. While physical ableism was pervasive in earlier work, particularly work targeting specific races and ethnicities, cognitive and psychological ableism became the standard in much of the work produced not only by white, but also black women's rights advocates. Cognitively and psychologically ableist rhetoric became almost inseparable in much of the work, as a woman who was deemed cognitively disabled was often automatically marked as psychologically disabled and incapable of making rational choices.

***Narrative Prosthesis:*** David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have identified narrative prosthesis as, "the pervasiveness of disability as a device of characterization in narrative art [...]."49 This project identifies narrative prosthesis at work in much of the early women's rights discourses where disability was utilized to construct narratives about womanhood and citizenship that elided disabled women because of the narrative prosthesis it engaged. Characterizing disability as the undesired and deviant aspect of society, whether it was physical, cognitive, or psychological, allowed for black and white women's rights advocates to argue for women's rights, but it also created and reinforced what womanhood and citizenship was "not," and it was not disabled.

***Corporeally Exclusionary Narratives:*** A corporeally exclusionary narrative (CEN) is a master narrative that is constructed, explicitly or implicitly, to exclude particular bodies from a rights argument. CENs used in early black and white women's rights arguments constructed worlds in which women with physical, cognitive or

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49. Mitchell and Snyder 16.

psychological disabilities could not claim the womanhood being defined and argued for. I have named these constructions *corporeally exclusionary narratives* (CENs). That is not to say that CENs were not used by others prior to this time period. In fact, this project argues that black and white women used CENs in order to fight against the CENs that had already been constructing them as unworthy of rights. As our corporeal nature is affiliated with the body, white men had already been excluding women based on physical inferiority (corporeality). The CENs that these groups of women used, however, did not just exclude based on physical inferiority, but also on cognitive and psychological ability. Fighting one CEN with another was a complex maneuver that did not claim rights for all women, but argued for the rights of some. These types of CENs were an integral part of the expediency arguments which many women's rights speakers/authors were using.

***Natural Rights and Expediency Arguments:*** Natural rights arguments broadly claim that certain rights inherently belong to everyone, as human beings or citizens. But, in practice, these arguments can be limiting because the claim is based on restrictive definitions of "humanity" and "citizenship." These definitions are never stable. Past definitions of humanity and citizenship revolve not only around race, gender, and sexuality, but around disability and bodily difference. Questions of "legal disability" are still part of debates regarding the humanity or citizenship rights of people with disabilities, particularly those who are cognitively or neurologically impaired. For this reason, there is the possibility for limitations in a natural rights argument.

Expediency arguments argue from the perspective of what is quickest and best and allow for a greater possibility of persuasion because the end goal is the betterment or progression of society. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell explains that an expediency argument

was viewed as less selfish than a justice (natural rights) argument. One was not arguing just for personal or individual rights, but that these rights will improve things for others, as well.<sup>50</sup> But, the limitations of the expediency argument stem from the same foundation that the possibilities do; an argument for a better or improved society relied on a common notion of what “better” and “improve” meant to the audience. The resultant world presented post-rights must be one that the vast majority of the audience saw as “better” than what was current. Additionally, relying on progress and improvement as the foundation for providing rights allowed society to determine the validity of someone’s rights if and only if that choice would “improve” society. This is a dangerous and complex path to travel as a rhetor because the “betterment of society” argument has the possibility for limiting the bodies that can claim the rights being argued for. If those bodies cannot justify their worth and their possibility for improving society as a result of the rights awarded, then those bodies can/will be excluded from the group of potential rights holders. This project identifies expediency in much of the early black and white women’s disability rhetoric. Disabled bodies were presented as invalid when in fact, those bodies were the ones in need of improvement physically, cognitively, or psychologically. It was expedient to claim rights for women who were able-bodied, and to elide those bodies that could not meet the standards of the CENs constructed to do so.

## **Literature Review: Disability Rhetoric and Black and White Women’s Rights Movements**

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50. K. Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her Vol. 1* (Westport: Praeger Publishing, 1989).

There are multiple works produced by rhetorical scholars and feminist historians regarding the women's movement, especially the early women's movement. Much of it is criticism of what the discourses, their assumptions, and the fact that what was being argued for was not necessarily applicable to all women. Most of this criticism revolves around race, gender, and class issues.

Historical and rhetorical texts like those of Susan Zaeske, Stephen Howard Browne, Lori D. Ginzberg, and Eleanor Flexner and Ellen Fitzpatrick provide an extensive accounting of white women's rights histories, the differences and similarities between competing white women's groups, and sometimes touch on the black women who may have been part of that work.<sup>51</sup> These texts, however, do not interrogate the absence of disability from these movements, nor do they tackle the use of disability as a marker of inferiority among both black and white women's groups.

Histories of black women's rights work like those written by Angela Davis, Jennifer Nelson, and Dorothy Roberts, provide a fruitful exploration of black women's groups, their arguments, their conflicts, and the ways in which they have pushed definitions of citizenship for women.<sup>52</sup> These provide a feminist perspective on movement events and allow me to interpret some of the social impact of the rhetorical strategies used by these particular groups of women, which can be evident in the way that the events and key figures are represented in the histories written.

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51. S. Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); S. Browne (1999); L. Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: An American Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); E. Flexner and E. Fitzpatrick, *A Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

52. A. Davis, *Race, Class, and Gender* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); J. Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, (New York University Press, 2003); D. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body – Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

There are a multitude of anthologies and collections not only of white women's work, but also the work of black women, as well as those who address the work of both groups of women. These anthologies provide historical context, and some provide a historical critique of the work within, but they deal primarily with the race and class contexts of the work. Collections of white women's work, like those of Miriam Schneir and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell gather the seminal works of white women's movements, but rarely acknowledge the diversity in the women's rights movement itself, in regards to race or class, let alone disability.<sup>53</sup> Collections of black women's rights work, like those of Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Shirley Wilson Logan, gather seminal texts among African-American and black feminists who were working for women's rights during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>54</sup> Most of these collections of women's public speeches or essays provide historical information about the texts that have been anthologized, but do little to question the rhetoric behind the work.

The rhetorical studies done in the English and communications fields on multiple women's rights movements also focus on the raced and classed rhetoric within not just the white women's movements, but also those of black women. Some of the most well-known work of feminist rhetoric is that produced by communications scholar Karlyn Kohrs Campbell. Campbell performs rhetorical analysis of early women's rights, as well as women's liberation, but, Campbell does not address disability as an axis of rhetorical analysis in her work.<sup>55</sup> Speech and communications journals have had multiple issues

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53. See prior footnote 51

54. See prior footnote 52

55. K. Kohrs Campbell, "Femininity and Feminism: To Be or Not to Be a Woman," *Communication Quarterly*, No. 31 (1983): 101-108; K. Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her Vol. I*

that focus on the rhetoric of women's rights and women's movements, producing articles that tackle issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class in black and white women's rights rhetoric.<sup>56</sup>

Very little (if any) of this work criticizes the movement for its able-bodied assumptions or its failure to consider disabled bodies in arguments for women's rights. This project takes a critical feminist disability position that critiques the use of disability and disability rhetoric in the rights arguments produced by early black and white women's rights movements. My work unearths patterns of disability, disability rhetoric, and ableist ideology across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

While there is work produced by disability studies scholars that engages the ideology of ability and ableism, there is a lack of disability studies work that rhetorically analyzes the similarities and differences in the disability rhetoric of early black and white women's rights movements, specifically.<sup>57</sup> Some authors address the problems of eugenic feminism<sup>58</sup>, and others critique the use of disability metaphor in women's rights work<sup>59</sup>, but there has been no formal identification of patterns of disability rhetoric within

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*and II* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1989); K. Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, No 59 (1973): 74-86.

56. B.R. Hancock, "Affirmation by Negation in the Women's Liberation Movement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, No 58 (1972): 264-271; D.S. Hope, "Redefinition of Self: A Comparison of the Rhetoric of the Women's Liberation and Black Liberation Movements," *Communication Quarterly*, No 23 (1975): 17-25; W.A. Linkugel, "The Rhetoric of American Feminism: A Social Movement Course," *Communication Education*, No 23 (1974): 121-130.

57. See Cherney; Kumari Campbell "Legislating" and *Contours*; and Siebers.

58. Feminist and disability studies scholar, Sharon Lamp reveals that "modern day feminists have carried forward the understanding of earlier feminists such as Gilman and Sanger, that personal control and autonomy is linked to individual health and well-being." The initial expediency based arguments Lamp identifies focus on the fact that the "eugenic decline of the race could be prevented only if women were granted greater political, social, sexual, and economic equality."

59. See V. M. May and B.A. Ferri, "Fixated on Ability: Questioning Ableist Metaphors in Feminist Theories of Resistance," in *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism*, Vol 26, Issue 1-2 (2005). 120-140.

the early black and white women's movement and no recognition of the ideologies of ability that underlay many arguments made for women's rights for women in the discourse, spoken and written, of early black and white women's movements.

Many disability studies scholars view disability rhetoric as the use of existing aspects or definitions of rhetoric and the ways in which it is used to discuss disability or represent disability. Other disability studies rhetorical analysis texts deal with the representations of disability in US culture<sup>60</sup>, but the definition of disability rhetoric that I use is not quite the same as a rhetorical study of disability or the representation of disability. My framing of disability rhetoric involves not only the rhetoric used to talk about disability, or the representations of disability in culture, but also the use of disability as a rhetorical strategy to argue for and against the rights of others.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the manner in which disability was utilized in expediency arguments and as the foil to a better society is integral to this project and its exploration of black and white women's rights rhetoric.

Finally, my work is informed by disability scholar Allison C. Carey's recently published monograph, *On the Margins of Citizenship: Intellectual Disability and Civil Rights in Twentieth-Century America*. Carey's work discusses citizenship issues in relation to people with intellectual disabilities, addressing not only the formal rights

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60. See A. Vidali, "Seeing What We Know: Disability and Theories of Metaphor," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*; B. Brueggeman and M. E. Lupo, eds, *Disability and/in Prose*, (London: Routledge, 2008); B. Brueggemann and J. Fredal, "Studying Disability Rhetorically," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol 17.4 (Fall 1997): 51-57; S. Kerschbaum, "Avoiding the Difference Fixation: Identity Categories, Markers of Difference, and the Teaching of Writing," *College Composition and Communication*, Vol 63.4 (2012): 616-633; and J. C. Wilson and C. Lewiecki-Wilson, *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001).

61. Perhaps the most recently published work on disability rhetoric, Jay Dolmage's *Disability Rhetoric* (2011), is closest in nature to my own working definition of disability rhetoric.

denied by a society, but the substantive rights, those things that are often not viewed as rights, until one no longer has access to them. I see Carey's work as particularly useful because women, black and white, have often been classified as mentally deficient and subjected to treatment by the medical community based not only in their diagnosis as mentally incompetent, but because of their race, gender, and sexuality-based deviancy from social norms. I extend Carrie's argument beyond those with intellectual disabilities to ask how the construction of women with disabilities as less than deserving of full citizenship rights may have resulted from the rhetorical strategies employed initially by women of the nineteenth century women's rights movements.

### **The Field: Scholarly Positioning within American Studies**

The field of Disability Studies is concerned with many of the same issues regarding the autonomy of the body, citizenship rights, and the reproductive rights of women as American Studies. And, although disability studies has often looked to American feminist work for direction, these communities have not always enabled scholars and/or activists to speak for disabled female bodies because of the exclusionary language and rhetoric that has been used by feminists and other public intellectuals regarding women, their bodies, and their rights.

The field of American Studies must start integrating disability into its work on identity and intersectional analysis. Disability is an integral axis of identity that has gone too long ignored and/or tangentially addressed in American Studies. If, as Kumari Campbell argues, ableism is:

A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is case as a diminished state of being human.<sup>62</sup>

Then, the work of Disability Studies and studies in ableism must find a home in American Studies. American Studies has already tackled issues of hegemony and structural oppression regarding race, gender, class, and sexuality. This project insists that disability is just as integral to American Studies discourses around ideologies and epistemologies. Particularly if we accept Kumari Campbell's assertion that, "It is not possible to have a concept of difference without ableism."<sup>63</sup>

This project works to integrate Disability Studies into American Studies through its analysis of the use of disability and ableism in discourses of US black and white women's rights movements. I work to unearth the spaces and places not where disability has been erased, but where the language of disability has been hyper-visible in US black and white women's rights discourses, in order to understand how these discursive constructions have been enacted and how they continue to be enacted in contemporary civil rights and feminist discourses regarding female bodies. Focusing on the absence/hyper-visibility, without discovering the mechanism by which it has been generated, whether physical or rhetorical, neither American Studies, nor Disability Studies, can move forward in regards to the specific rights of US women with disabilities and their rights to their own bodies.

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62. Kumari Campbell "Inciting Legal Fiction"

63. Kumari Campbell *Contours* 6.

An intersectional approach to women's rights that puts disability at the forefront, and recognizes the ways in which disability has been used to construct race, gender, class, and sexuality, is absolutely imperative, considering the current moment in our society and the constant attack on women (assume able-bodied) through legislation regarding contraception and other reproductive care. This current attack on the rights of able-bodied women is very visible, while the attack on reproductive rights and health rights for women with disabilities has been an ongoing and invisible civil/human rights issue for centuries. American Studies can no longer ignore disability as an integral axis of identity, its duality with difference, nor its use in corporeally exclusionary narratives (CENs) in any rights movements across history.

Additionally, the importance of this work is evident in our contemporary society, as the disability tropes established by the earliest women's rights advocates are still circulating within social and academic systems which value independence and autonomy, and devalue the disabled experience, through the denial of legal and substantive rights, as well as the representation of the disabled body as anything other than a problem in need of a solution. One area where we can locate resonances of the disability tropes utilized by women's rights rhetors is in the interaction of law enforcement with people with disabilities. Anecdotal studies, as well as research enacted by the National Council on Disability demonstrates the legal and social battles that people with disabilities have to fight because the US legal systems (including the police and court systems) view people with disabilities either as non-compliant, threatening, or incompetent to care for

themselves and/or others.<sup>64</sup> Whether it is the continued belief that independence and/or autonomy is a foil to disability, or that disability is an inferior or dangerous status, or the use of disability as a scare tactic to convince others, or claiming others are disabled in order to fight for one's own rights, the tropes present throughout the work of women's rights discourses remain embedded in social and legal belief systems that continue to ignore or oppress people with disabilities. Police brutality against people with disabilities is more visible today, with the attention that is being paid towards psychological disability (referred to as mental illness) and cognitive disabilities (referred to as intellectual disabilities). Examples such as a young man with Down Syndrome being choked to death in MD by police officers who were called in to remove him from a movie theatre for not buying an additional ticket (disability as an inferior or dangerous status); or the statistics for women with disabilities who are involved in domestic abuse situations, their treatment by legal systems, and their loss of their children via court systems that view the able-bodied parent as inherently more capable of caring for children (independence/autonomy as a foil to disability and disability as an inferior status, as well as claiming another is disabled in order to gain one's own rights):

- Victims who report abuse have increased risk of being institutionalized, losing basic decision-making rights or custody of children
- Parents with disabilities are the only distinct community of Americans who struggle to retain custody of their children because of their status.
- Removal rates of parents with psychiatric disabilities is as high as 70 – 80%

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64. "Rocking the Boat: Ensuring the Rights of Parents with Disabilities and Their Children." *National Council on Independent Living*. NCIL, September 2012. Web. 1 June 2016 and "Domestic Violence and Disability." *Barrier Free Living*. Barrier Free Living. Web. 1 June 2016.

- Removal rates of parents with intellectual disabilities is as high as 80%
- Extremely high removal rates and loss of parental rights for parents with sensory or physical disabilities.
- Parents with disabilities are more likely to lose custody of their children after divorce.<sup>65</sup>

Stories of violence against people with disabilities, as well as the denial of legal and substantive rights to those who are disabled are the product of our continued social and legal beliefs in the disability tropes rhetorically constructed and reinforced by many rights advocates in the last two centuries who have purported to fight for the rights of all, while also rhetorically excluding people with disabilities, intentionally or unintentionally.

### **The Road Map: Chapter Outline**

Chapter Two, “Autonomy and Dependence: Constructing Womanhood,” focuses on the use of disability in the earliest black and white women’s rhetorics of autonomy. Definitions of autonomy and independence relied on able-bodied assumptions and expectations of black and white women. I utilize the work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Maria Miller Stewart, and Sojourner Truth in order to discuss black and white women’s desire to fight against corporeally exclusionary narratives of womanhood in order to redefine their own perceptions of womanhood, white and black.

Chapter Three, “Voting and Reform: Constructing Woman as Citizen,” addresses patterns of rhetoric involving cognitive ability and morality that surfaced in both black and white women’s rights groups in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Both groups

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65. NCIL research data quoted on the Barrier Free Living website.

of women argued for cognitively ability as a requisite of responsible female citizenship. As cognitive disability was often linked with immorality and poor decision making, its connection to psychological disability became visible in the disability rhetoric utilized in this time period. Black and white women's arguments produced corporeally exclusionary narratives requiring women to be both cognitively and psychologically able-bodied in order to be rational and responsible citizens worthy of rights. The work I address in this chapter comes from members of the NAWSA, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Stanton Blatch, Carrie Chapman Catt, Mary Church Terrell and Fannie Barrier Williams.

Chapter Four, "Eugenics and Reproduction: Constructing Motherhood," interrogates the role eugenics played in providing the foundation for the next wave of women's rights arguments regarding motherhood and reproductive freedom. Whether it was positive eugenics or negative eugenics, the end goal was to deny access to reproductive choices to some, while providing it to others. The corporeally exclusionary narratives produced by black and white women of this time period focused primarily on cognitive and psychological abilities in woman. Some were concerned with the prevention of inferior stock, while others advocated for women to be able to make the best hereditary decisions possible. The work of white birth control advocates, such as Margaret Sanger and Charlotte Perkins Gilman embraced both positive and negative eugenics; however, white women were not the only ones fighting for reproductive rights. In addition to the voices of Addie W. Hunton and Josie B. Hall, the special June 1932 issue of *The Birth Control Review* gathered male and female voices from across the black community to discuss issues of black women, reproduction, and birth control. Most of these rhetorical arguments, black and white, made the case for birthing and raising the

best possible child that one could, and avoiding the production of inferior, disabled generations.

Chapter Five, provides a conclusion that discusses the possibilities for contemporary feminist discourses surrounding women's rights and women's reproductive rights, in light of the disability tropes that have been present in women's rights discourses over time. It advocates for a critical feminist disability perspective in all discussions of womanhood, motherhood, and human rights. It also challenges feminist scholars and activists to be self-reflexive about their own uses of disability, disability metaphor, disability rhetoric, and corporeally exclusionary narratives (CENs) in their own writing and work. I advocate for a movement among feminist scholars to eliminate the use of disability tropes and to produce a method of argumentation that does not rely on expediency arguments or CENs in order to establish women's "fitness"; a movement which will produce a discourse that focuses on women's health care and women's rights for women alone, and not as a mechanism to control and discipline women's bodies.

## Ch. 2: Autonomy and Ableism: Defining Womanhood

As early black and white women's rights groups constructed their arguments for inclusion, many relied on demonstrations of "fitness" and "ability" as qualities needed in order to obtain the rights and privileges afforded those named as women and citizens. Autonomy was often the grounding element of their rights and citizenship arguments, as many women wished to be free and not legally controlled by men (whether fathers, husbands, or sons).<sup>66</sup> Citizenship, however, is a process of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion,<sup>67</sup> and according to rhetorician Jay T. Dolmage, rhetoric is also a tool of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion.<sup>68</sup> The rhetorics of early women's rights advocates, black and white, argued for the inclusion of some women while leaving others unable to claim the same rights because they were unfit or unable to claim autonomy. While we may not use the terms autonomy and independence interchangeably today, some women's rights arguments from the past do so. Lingering rhetorics of autonomy and their links to independence and freedom, as well as the capacity for growth, should demonstrate the dangerous construction of citizenship via early women's rights rhetorics that would include, but also exclude, particular bodies.

This chapter focuses on the deployment of the rhetorical theme of autonomy and its parallel relationship with disability rhetoric in the women's rights discourses of both white and black advocate groups in the mid- to late-nineteenth century (1832-1860).

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66. See A. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (New York: W W Norton and Company, 1981); K. Kohrs Campbell, ed, *Man Cannot Speak for Her Vol. I*, (Westport: Praeger Publishing, 1989).

67. See R. Mohanty and R. Tandon, *Participatory Citizenship: Identity, Exclusion, Inclusion* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishers, 2006); A. Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship: Intellectual Disability and Civil Rights in Twentieth-Century America*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

68. Dolmage

Advocates such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Maria Miller Stewart, and Sojourner Truth chose to employ a rhetorical strategy that fought against women's legal and social positions as dependents in US society. The texts I have selected provide specific examples of the ableist arguments of mid- to late-nineteenth century black and white women's rights movements and their shared use of disability rhetoric. Their arguments, steeped in autonomy and independence, excluded people with disabilities from the rights they claimed. As early as the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, women's rights leaders positioned disability and autonomy in opposition to one another as a way of defining citizenship and women's rights. The concept of autonomy left and still leaves many bodies excluded, particularly those bodies that cannot meet the ideals of physical, emotional, or financial independence. The discourse of autonomy and independence was ableist in nature, and worked to produce sexist, racist, and classist exclusions from citizenship that relied on disability as the marker for exclusion.

### **Dreaded Dependence: White Women's CENs of Autonomy**

As part of an early white women's rights movement, leaders, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton simultaneously claimed autonomy and suffrage as the requirements for citizenship. This argument was, perhaps, necessary in a white-dominated American society where the concept of "dependency" had taken on a negative meaning. History scholars, Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, have argued that the meaning of dependency was beginning to change in the mid-nineteenth century, but still held negative connotations for women:

[I]ts qualitative character [was] changing, with new psychological and therapeutic idioms displacing the explicitly racist and misogynous idioms of the industrial era. Yet dependency nonetheless remain[ed] feminized and racialized; the new psychological meanings have strong feminine associations, [...]<sup>69</sup>

I would further their assertions by arguing that the rationales used to assign dependent status were grounded heavily in mental and physical impairments, disability. Women and people of color were labeled as disabled, biologically inferior, and intellectually and physically sub-standard. In the early nineteenth century, women's "disabilities" were used by white men to claim moral and psychological deficiency sufficient to deny them citizenship rights. Connecting disability and dependency created a feminized and racialized disabled body.<sup>70</sup> Any "body" that was unable to fulfill the requirements of able-bodied independence must surely be dependent and a leach on society's resources, whether that body was female, of color, and/or disabled.

In *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder use the term "narrative prosthesis" to refer to writers' dependency on disability as a means of characterization and in the use of metaphor in order to substantiate a particular narrative. Mitchell and Snyder use *Moby Dick's* Ahab as a character example whose disability has characterized him. His leg amputation, which is the result of his encounter with Moby Dick, is his source of madness. While Ahab has adapted his ship to his needs, the repetitive use of prosthesis and ideas of

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69. N. Fraser and L. Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependence: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," *Signs* 19.2 (Winter 1994): 309-336.

70. This will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

prosthesis throughout the novel demonstrate that his false leg does more than just assist him in standing. It forms the man as maniac, serving as an example of narrative prosthesis, where disability serves as the characterizing mechanism that propels the story forward.

This same dependency on disability exists in the rhetorical theme of autonomy in many rights movements, including women's rights. In order to support a narrative that excludes particular bodies (corporeal exclusion), those bodies must be marked as undesirable or unacceptable. If autonomy was the desired marker for citizenship among women's rights activists, then a body had to be able to achieve independence physically, intellectually, financially, etc. The language of disability was used in order to define independence and serve as its measuring tool for autonomy. Disability became the foil for autonomy. As Mitchell and Snyder have articulated, disability is often used as a literary device that defines or constructs a part of the narrative. Definitions of foil are consistent in regards to literature, "What we observe in literature very often is that a foil is a secondary character who contrasts with the major character to enhance the importance of the major character."<sup>71</sup> In order to enhance the importance of independence, disability was positioned as its foil, or opposite. Placing disability in opposition to independence in rhetorical arguments created a figurative and literal relationship between the two that would be sustained in white women's rights arguments through the early-twentieth century.<sup>72</sup>

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71. "Foil," *Literary Devices*, 31 July 2015 <<http://literarydevices.net/foil/>>.

72. Evidence of women's rights discourses in chapters three and four will demonstrate this.

This ableist rhetoric has consisted of the use of disability metaphors, analogies, descriptors, and examples to characterize women or women's opponents, existing laws, social institutions, and political powers as problems to be overcome or identities to be eschewed. Words such as "crippled," "diseased," "ill," or "paralysed" were used to describe not only the contemporary situation of society and the legal restrictions placed upon women, but to describe women themselves and the men who were limiting their independence.

Using disability metaphors, disability as a foil, and narrative prosthesis, white women's rights movements created what I call *corporeally exclusionary narratives* (CENs)—master narratives that exclude particular bodies. It is not just the use of disability rhetoric that must be analyzed in the arguments of these white women's rights leaders, but the broader narratives that they have constructed in the process—CENs. For example, arguments may look like the following:

- The brilliant, educated, capable woman is barred from voting/citizenship merely because she is female
- Women argue that many men of less intelligence, moral judgment, education are granted this right out of hand (attacking intellectual abilities)
- Women claim their rights based on their own intelligence, moral judgment, and education, eliminating those men and women who do not meet these standards.
- A master narrative is created in which any body that cannot meet the corporeal standards that rhetors have outlined for autonomy, independence, and citizenship is excluded from the grand US narrative

These corporeally exclusionary narratives (CENs) were utilized to identify which bodies were acceptable and which were unacceptable as candidates for citizenship based on definitions of autonomy that may/may not be achievable by disabled bodies. These rhetorical works—and the CENs they were based on—had, and continue to have, an impact on society’s construction and reinforcement of disability, race, and gender as abject as well as the dependency discourse(s) surrounding these bodies. These social constructions allowed for particular bodies to be excluded from rights arguments that claimed to fight for the rights of “all.”

The use of corporeally exclusionary narratives (CENs) resulted in expediency arguments that went against the very ideals of natural rights argumentation, which multiple historians have claimed female women’s rights advocates utilized in their fight against male opposition. Scholars have also acknowledged the movement from natural rights to expediency arguments as a means of political pragmatism. Women did not want to appear selfish or “manly;” therefore, they argued for the betterment of society, not just for the betterment of themselves.<sup>73</sup> Many historians, however, continue to claim that some arguments are primarily natural rights and only include bits of expediency. But, I would argue that the use of CENs necessarily directly contradicts the basic principles of natural rights. If parameters for intelligence and physical ability were put into place as markers of worthiness, then a natural rights argument could not be used, because a natural rights argument argued for the rights of all based on their human existence. The claim that women were not disabled by their gender, thus, deserving of rights, set an ableist narrative in place that allowed for discrimination against those who *were* disabled,

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73. See Kraditor *Ideas of Suffrage*; Kohrs Campbell *Man Cannot Vol I*; Zaeske; and Browne.

and resulted in an expediency narrative that allowed women to claim rights for themselves and to deny rights to others simultaneously.<sup>74</sup>

An ableist discourse can only ever argue for the rights of able-bodied citizens, or those that can achieve similar status, resulting in the exclusion of any body that does not meet the criteria of autonomy and independence. Employing ableist arguments created rhetorical exclusions that worked to exclude bodies figuratively and literally. The inclusion of particular female bodies within the rhetoric of white women's rights reinforced a citizenship definition founded in ableist assumptions about autonomy and exclusions that would continue to complicate rights arguments and create divisions within women's rights movements.

### ***Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Cognitive Ableism and Fear Tactics***

In her speech at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton struggled to keep her argument based in natural rights because of her use of disability rhetoric in order to argue for the rights of women. The disability rhetoric significantly limited who could actually claim the rights that Cady Stanton and others were arguing for (also evidenced in the Declaration of Sentiments). I would argue that this was because nineteenth-century definitions of humanity were based not just on a white, male, middle/upper-class, but also required that that white, middle/upper class males be able-bodied. This standard was challenged by women's rights movements with regards to gender, but the ableist underpinnings remained not only unchallenged, but reinforced. For women rhetors of the time, utilizing a natural rights philosophy that still adhered to

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74. See Baynton.

the restrictive race, class, and ability standards of humanity meant that any bodies that did not fit could be easily discarded by the rhetor herself through the use of disability rhetoric, which constructed corporeally exclusionary narratives. Rhetoric scholar Karlyn Kohrs Campbell identifies Cady Stanton's speech as one of the speeches from early conventions that, "illuminate[s] movement ideology and embodies the rhetorical effort to reach out to women and persuade them to support the cause."<sup>75</sup> For this reason, Cady Stanton's speech can serve as an emblematic text in the early discourses of women's rights—a text that demonstrated the ideological underpinnings and desires of this movement and many others that would follow.

Tobin Siebers's *Disability Theory* addresses the fallacies of ableist rights argumentation claiming, "the practice of granting rights to only those people capable of demonstrating a prescribed level of physical and mental ability must be swept away if being human is to serve as a universal standard for political membership."<sup>76</sup> Thus when all bodies were not included, the premise of natural rights ceased to exist, and the discourse and its rhetoric were forced to change accordingly. This conflict with pure natural rights argumentation opened the door for the use of expediency arguments which would allow them to claim a less selfish reason for rights—the betterment of society.<sup>77</sup> Utilizing expediency arguments, however, also served to create even more CENs, which excluded any body that could be classified as a detriment to society.

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75. Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Vol 1* 59.

76. Siebers 180.

77. See Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Vol 1* and Kraditor *Ideas of Suffrage*; and Ginzberg.

Cady Stanton worked to counter arguments (CENs) that men had made against women's independence based on physical superiority. Cady Stanton focused on the fact that differences between genders existed not because of physical inferiority, but because of the lack of opportunities for women. She furthered the argument by asserting that man's intellectual superiority was the result of women not having "a fair trial."<sup>78</sup> Adhering to established ideologies of ability and independence, her speech relied on assumptions of physical and intellectual able-bodiedness as a standard for success/power and achievement, as well as citizenship:

Let us now consider man's claim to physical superiority [...] But the perfection of the physique is great power combined with endurance. Now your strongest men are not always the tallest men, nor the broadest, nor the most corpulent, but very often the small, elastic man, who is well built, tightly put together, and possessed of an indomitable will. Bodily strength depends much on the power of the will.<sup>79</sup>

Eschewing the notion that gender determined physical superiority, Cady Stanton made a strong claim that physical size did not determine superiority. Thus, autonomy should not be determined by a woman's physical strength. But, she strayed into murky territory in this last line when she claimed that will power determined bodily strength. Some bodies, regardless of the person's will power were simply not "able" to enact feats of strength or to perform those acts that one would associate with physical strength or superiority.

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78. E. C. Stanton, "Speech at the Seneca Falls Convention, 1848" in K. Kohrs Campbell, ed, *Man Cannot Speak for Her, Vol II* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1989): 50-51.

79. Cady Stanton, "Seneca Falls" 51.

Cady Stanton's rationale assumed that all of the bodies in question were able-bodied.

She continued:

You do not say the horse is physically superior to man, for although he has more muscular power, yet the power of mind in man renders him his superior, and he guides him wherever he will. The power of mind seems to be in no way connected with the size and strength of body.<sup>80</sup>

And:

Mental power depends far more on the temperament, than on the size of the head or the size of the body.<sup>81</sup>

Cady Stanton's argument that the power of the mind was in no way connected with the power of the body worked well for women in this time period, as their bodies were seen as physically inferior and weak; however, they had to argue that they were mentally capable of enacting the vote and making decisions for themselves, regardless of their deficiency in physical size. Her reliance on the belief in the mind/body dichotomy would not have been unfamiliar to her audience. Separating the mind from the body was a useful tool for many female rhetors, as the focus for autonomy could be on mental and intellectual ability, rather than on the condition of the female body.

Her argument could have been powerful for people with physical disabilities. But, problems arise when we consider that no argument was being made for those whose mental powers were impaired. Nothing included those whose intellectual capacities may have been judged as less than ideal in terms of their rights to make decisions or to claim

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80. Cady Stanton, "Seneca Falls" 51.

81. Cady Stanton, "Seneca Falls" 51.

rights at all. In fact, as we can see in the convention's culminating document, the Declaration of Sentiments (DoS), those very people whose intellect was deemed insufficient were to be denied the right to vote or to enact any rights of citizenship.<sup>82</sup> As a result, lack of intellect provided a valid reason for denying someone autonomy and citizenship.

Cady Stanton's connection of mental power (cognitive ability) to temperament created an even larger problem. This was an act of narrative prosthesis, where disability was used as a stand in for characterization and devaluation. A person's character or attitude was then tied to her or his mental and intellectual abilities and limited the possibilities for that person's good citizenship. Additionally, this type of connection between intellect and morality creates a complicated narrative regarding psychological disability—if someone's intellectual ability is intact, then surely they would behave properly. There must be something wrong with her mind (psychologically) if she would choose to make decisions that were considered immoral and irresponsible. Male rhetors were already using this argument in order to classify women as ineffectual and inferior, relying on their irrational behavior and emotionality as the reason for keeping them

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82. The grievance on the women's list that summed up the foundational assumptions at work in the philosophies of many women's rights movements: "He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men--both natives and foreigners. [...] He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life." To be lower class or foreign is to be ignorant, to be ignorant is to be degraded, to be degraded is to be barbaric, to be barbaric is to be impaired of function, to be impaired of function is to be dependent, and to be dependent is to be abject. And, if ignorance determines one's fitness to vote and enact the rights of citizenship, then any and all of the above can also be used to determine the fitness of certain bodies for citizenship. The complicated but effective web-like ableist construction that begins to develop in the earliest documented discourse of the rights movements would be a danger to future disability rights arguments well into the twenty first century. This type of logic in rights movements is what has allowed for future rights discourses to rely on CENs in order to intentionally or unintentionally secure rights for one group and continue to exclude people with disabilities in the process; M. McClintock, L. Coffin Mott, and E. C. Stanton, "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, 1848" in K. Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her Vol II* (Westport: Praeger Press, 1989).

subjected to men. Cady Stanton argued that women, when they were allowed to exercise their rights, would “naturally” become more rational and would understand their roles in society, “Physically, as well as intellectually, it is use that produces growth and development.”<sup>83</sup>

Cady Stanton relied on the potential that women had for becoming the enlightened and developed minds that she argued for. Use produces growth. Then, what of the physically or intellectually disabled man or woman? Did their lack of potential for becoming educated or developed impede their ability to claim citizenship and rights? Or, what about those who were labeled as intellectually disabled simply because they were foreign? Or, women who were labeled as psychologically or intellectually disabled because of their moral choices (not wanting sex or wanting too much sex)? Was the assumption that there was no growth or development possible because the “use” may not fulfill traditional notions of “use?” What definitions of growth and development were assumed in this time period? What were the markers of such? Where did the body of the working man or woman fit into this argument? While those bodies were used over and over again in the act of labor, thus growing and developing, those same bodies were deemed inferior because the intellect was not engaged. The movement had already argued that education was necessary for full citizenship rights, claiming that women who were enlightened or educated would naturally grow and develop. Furthering this rationale, Cady Stanton reinforced the notions of ability, and in so doing added class as a marker of citizenship. It was a particular type of physical and intellectual use that was being proposed here. It was a particular type of education and enlightenment that was

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83. Cady Stanton, “Seneca Falls” 52.

being demanded—one that was not accessible to the working man or woman in this time period. These dis-abled bodies remained problematic and, therefore, had to be excluded from a natural rights argument via an ableist rhetoric that would overtly eliminate bodies based on intellect, rather than ethnicity or class.

While Cady Stanton’s speech was an effective argument for women’s rights in this time period, the ableist ideologies of independence and ability present in the disability rhetoric that she relied on were an impediment to her consistent use of natural rights argumentation. The pervasiveness of these notions of fit and independent humanity led her rhetorical strategy down a road of attack against those she deemed intellectually inferior to herself and other middle class white women:

All white men in this country have the same rights, however they may differ in mind, body or estate [...] We should not feel so sorely grieved if no man who had not attained the full stature of a Webster, Clay, Van Buren, or Gerrit Smith could claim the right of the elective franchise. But to have drunkards, idiots, horse-racing, rumselling rowdies [sic], ignorant foreigners and silly boys fully recognized, while we ourselves are thrust out from all the rights that belong to citizens, it is too grossly insulting to the dignity of women to be longer quietly submitted to. The right is ours. Have it, we must. Use it, we will.<sup>84</sup>

On the heels of claiming that all white men had the same rights (which we know historically was not true), Cady Stanton set an ableist standard for voting rights, using upper-class, white, educated men as an example of those who were automatically granted

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84. Cady Stanton, “Seneca Falls” 54-55.

their rights. But, her argument then violated the natural rights philosophy when she declared specific groups of men not worthy of the vote. To say that these men did not deserve the vote was to buy into the expediency mentality and the premise that one must earn the vote by demonstrating his/her physical and intellectual value to society. She fell into the same trap of utilizing a CEN in order to dispel a CEN. By arguing that middle class white women's bodies were not inferior because they had strong working minds, Cady Stanton reinforced the corporeally exclusionary narrative that required a cognitive ability that meets the standards she was supporting. She was really only arguing for certain bodies, and only those able-bodies were being represented in the convention's Declaration of Sentiments as well.

Even more telling, this argument was followed directly by Cady Stanton's expediency argument that women would purify the poll, make the environment better, and curb the degenerate behavior of men. But, Cady Stanton's ableist argument assumed that these women were educated, civilized, proper women. She discounted the wives of those men she deemed unfit to vote, and lots of other women—uneducated, unmarried, etc. These women would likely have been classified as ineligible based on the requirements for citizenship that Cady Stanton and the other leaders of the movement had put into place in the DoS, Cady Stanton's speech, and other discourses to follow. Cady Stanton avoided expediency arguments in many areas, rejecting the male-generated CEN's of a "woman's traditional role" and the "cult of domesticity" that kept other women from being as assertive and forceful in their speeches, but she was not always consistent in her call for natural rights as the primary reason for women's equal rights. Pervasive notions of independence, perhaps, had much more influence on Cady Stanton's

ability to make an argument that was strictly based in natural rights. If one claimed independence and rights based in a philosophy of humanity that defined humanity as white, educated, and physically and mentally fit, as Cady Stanton did, then it became impossible for any natural rights argument to successfully include all bodies under its blanket of protection.

But, why was independence so important to the women of this movement? Why was it so important that it became a stumbling block to their future arguments for non-ableist natural rights? Why has the notion of independence or autonomy taken such a strong foothold in women's rights movements discourses that still exist today? Why had dependence become a dirty word and a marker of oppression for women in nineteenth-century US society? Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon have developed a genealogy of the word dependency. Their genealogical work has also unearthed the connection of definitions of dependency to the changes in meaning of independence following the Revolutionary War, as well as subsequent industrialization and the change in wage labor. According to Fraser and Gordon, in pre-industrial times, being a dependent was actually the norm and being independent was a deviation.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, the Industrial Era brought about an emphasis on three icons of dependency, one of which was the "housewife". Because many husbands were leaving the home to work for wages, the housewife was seen not as a working partner in the home and on the land, but as a parasite.<sup>86</sup> Wage laborers were fighting to be seen as independent of their employers; therefore, the wife's dependence on her husband was necessary to her husband's

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85. Fraser and Gordon 313.

86. Fraser and Gordon 316-18.

independence, establishing an identity for both that was co-dependent, unable to exist without the other.

Consequently, the fact that the rhetors of the white women's rights movements of this time period felt the need to fight against this notion of the dependent housewife was not surprising.<sup>87</sup> Fighting this stigma required a rhetoric that was convincing, both legally and socially. Their rhetoric drew on the ideology of independence—an ideology that celebrated the independent individual, the citizen that “pulled himself up by his bootstraps” and did not rely on any one else for his well-being. Disputing their male-assigned role as dependents and capitalizing on the idea of independence as an aspect of human nature, many women's movement rhetors asserted that women who were given their natural rights (in the nineteenth century—voting, property, and divorce rights) would “naturally” understand and embrace their responsibilities and would be able to be independent and productive citizens. This ableist rhetoric, steeped in notions of autonomy, revolved around not just the *right* to choose but the *ability* to choose. Voting rights would give women the ability to choose for themselves; but if they could not choose wisely, then voting could not and should not be their right. Responsibility was the focus of the central part of Cady Stanton's speech:

Let woman live as she should. Let her feel her accountability to her Maker [...] Let her live first for God, and she will not make imperfect man an object of reverence and awe. Teach her her responsibility as a being of conscience and reason [...] and that true happiness springs from

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87. From this point on, I will refer to the movements, in which case I mean the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries' U.S. women's rights movements, not the second or third wave of the U.S. women's movements.

duty accomplished. Thus will she learn the lesson of individual responsibility for time and eternity. That neither father, husband, brother or son, however willing they may be, can discharge her high duties of life, or stand in her stead.<sup>88</sup>

Religion aside, Cady Stanton asserted that woman, once taught, would be a being of conscience and reason.<sup>89</sup> Disputing the “civilly dead” status of the married woman, Cady Stanton claimed that every woman was responsible for herself. The “true happiness” that came from individual responsibility and the fulfillment of one’s duties was the goal. A woman would learn that individual responsibility was the ultimate duty of every being. This emphasis on individual responsibility engaged a CEN that left any body that was dependent on another in a precarious position. And, any body judged to be inferior, void of conscience and reason (black people, immigrants, lower-class, disabled), should also be void of any rights that might have been available to them otherwise.

Many women, in the process of rejecting their dependent status, reinforced the ableist notion that dependence was a problem, was immoral, was irresponsible, and should be eschewed at all costs. Cady Stanton’s work reinforced the dichotomy between independence/responsibility and dependence/abjection. Coupled with the rhetoric in the DoS, presented the very same day, the discourse of this early white women’s rights movement created a philosophical foundation steeped in ideologies of independence and corporeal exclusion that would continue to be drawn on to support women’s claims of

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88. Cady Stanton, “Seneca Falls” 55.

89. This project does not engage with the religious aspects of the early women’s movement. There are many scholars who have discussed the influence of religion on the movement and its arguments.

fitness and ability to be citizens. It was a discourse of autonomy that relied on definitions of “woman” and “womanhood” that were specifically white, middle-class, and able-bodied.

One specific aspect of white women’s rights that Cady Stanton and others focused on was the right to divorce and to claim custody of their children. The 1860 Divorce Debates involved Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Reverend Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Ernestine Potowski Rose, as well as Wendell Phillips. Each of the speakers spoke for and against different resolutions presented by Cady Stanton regarding marriage and divorce, and revealed some of the underlying ideologies and tensions of the white women’s rights movements at the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>90</sup>

Although Blackwell (who disagreed with Cady Stanton) and Rose (who supported Cady Stanton) did not necessarily engage the same type of arguments seen in Cady Stanton’s speech discussed below, their work did rely on natural rights and expediency arguments, both, which left questions about the possibilities for claiming women’s rights solely on the basis of humanity. For Cady Stanton, women’s rights were not just about achieving the vote in order to claim autonomy, they were about addressing all the injustices done to woman, particularly in marriage. Without addressing marriage’s legal and social disabilities<sup>91</sup>, Cady Stanton believed women could not truly be autonomous.

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90. This was a movement that split and shifted less than ten years later because of opposing opinions on the focus of the movement. They split into two factions, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), led by Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe and the “more radical” National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. The NWSA had a broader scope of interests in terms of the woman’s rights agenda, while the AWSA focused on suffrage. Both, however, would continue the use of corporeally exclusionary narratives (CENs) as part of their discourses of choice that surrounded rights for women. A reunion between the NWSA and AWSA (forming the NAWSA) eventually took place in 1890 when both factions realized that they were splitting women between themselves, which was weakening their overall campaign for suffrage and the independence they believed would come with the vote.

Cady Stanton's use of disability rhetoric in her speech worked to accomplish something different rhetorically. Rather than argue for women based on their intellectual capacity, Cady Stanton used disability as a fear tactic. Her speech argued for marriages of love, where two people were considered equal partners (as in a contract). Cady Stanton's disability rhetoric was at its strongest in this particular speech; wherein she claimed the ramifications of unequal marriages included not only social disease, but also physical and cognitive disabilities:

Men and brethren, look into your asylums for the blind, the deaf and dumb, the idiot, the imbecile, the deformed, the insane; go out into the by-lanes and dens of this vast metropolis, and contemplate that reeking mass of depravity; pause before the terrible revelations made by statistics of the rapid increase of all this moral and physical impotency and learn how fearful a thing it is to violate the immutable laws of the beneficent Ruler of the universe; and there behold the terrible (sorrowful) retributions of your violence on woman! Learn how false and cruel are those institutions, which, with a coarse materialism, set aside those holy instincts of the woman to bear no children but those of love!<sup>92</sup>

Taking note of all of the elements of society that Cady Stanton put under her umbrella of God's retributions (the blind, deaf, mute, idiotic, imbecilic, deformed and insane), it was clear that she believed that physical disabilities were, in part, the result of man's disobedience to God, a punishment for their injustices towards women. Using disability

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91. Kohrs Campbell refers to it as such in her 1989 work, *Man Cannot Speak for Her, Vol. I.*

92. E. C. Stanton, "National Woman's Rights Convention Debate, New York, 1860" in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, ed. *Man Cannot Speak for Her, Vol. II* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1989): 195. Commonly referred to as "Divorce Debates."

as the threatened outcome in an expediency argument, she relied on society's views on disability and the negative ontology associated with a disabled existence. If women, and men, cared at all about bettering society, then eliminating unwanted disability was important. Cady Stanton constructed a CEN via an expediency argument that called for eliminating unwanted children, but also established the need to eliminate any body that was disabled.

First, she charged men to look in asylums, where they would find those with physical and mental or psychological disabilities. The men were next instructed to travel the town, in its dens and alleyways, taking stock of the depravity (one can guess that she refers to alcoholism and prostitution). Statistics were the next piece of evidence that these men were implored to acknowledge, perhaps newspapers and other sources of news in the society. These statistics would reveal the increase in "moral and physical impotency" and would demonstrate to the men the dangers of violating God's natural laws. Allowing women autonomy and independence, then, should eliminate all of these social and physical ills.

Laying the blame for all of this in the laps of men may have been a convenient rhetorical strategy for Cady Stanton, but the "reeking mass of depravity" that she conjured dangerously placed people with disabilities, prostitutes, and drunken husbands on an equal plane of retribution that sent the message that people with disabilities, prostitutes, and alcoholics were all being punished for some type of sin—the sin of denying women autonomy. Cady Stanton's charge to the men in her society to take note of all of the "depravity" was not for naught. She was crafty in her construction of this society of God's retribution. She reassured her audience that this society did not have to

exist. In fact, these elements of society *should not* exist. If men would recognize their violence against women, then society would not have to suffer these “ills.” And, consequently, they would have a world without inferior bodies in it, a world blessed by God. A corporeally exclusionary narrative was evident in Cady Stanton’s speeches and much of her other discursive work, where physical and cognitive deficiencies were the markers of inferiority for immigrants and other groups deemed undesirable. These undesirables were not part of the “eligible participants” in autonomy discourses amongst many white women’s rights activists, but they would be eligible for the reform efforts that many of these women called for before and after the Civil War.<sup>93</sup>

The last sentence of Cady Stanton’s quote is especially interesting, in regards to the disability rhetoric employed throughout her piece: “Learn how false and cruel are those institutions, which, with a coarse materialism, set aside those holy instincts of the woman to bear no children but those of love!” Pulled out of context this statement seems to make a case for women to control reproduction, to decide when and if to have sex, and to take control of their own bodies. However, when plugged back into the original quote, in context, a more disturbing message arises. If Cady Stanton had successfully impressed up on her audience that the social problems in the first half of the quote were the result of man’s violence against women, and that children born out of that violence were not born of love, I would argue that Cady Stanton’s underlying message was that this depravity (disability) resulted when children were not born out of love. Thus, it would have sent the message that any child born with a disability was born of violence and not of love. The result of denying women independence and the right to vote was disability. It was a

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93. To be addressed in Chapter Three.

dangerous path to tread, making a connection between physical disability and social depravity, but it was not uncommon to many arguments in this time period. I believe that Cady Stanton did, perhaps, send an effective message to her audience, but one that perpetuated a belief that had long been held in much of organized religion—a belief that physical disabilities were punishment for sin and/or injustice.

Cady Stanton's speech opened the door for future arguments of women's rights related to motherhood, as it blamed men for the violence and oppression against women that resulted in societal depravity.<sup>94</sup> The freedom of women to choose, and to not be chosen for, should, according to Cady Stanton's logic, lead to a much better society. Additionally, a women's right to choose for herself would eliminate unwanted pregnancies and children, resulting in perfect, healthy, and well-disciplined children who would provide a better future. Cady Stanton's rhetoric veered into an expediency argument that allowed for future women's rights activists to reinforce and reconstruct CENs via expediency arguments, and eliminate disabled bodies from the white women's rights discourses of womanhood and citizenship.

### ***Lucretia C. Mott: The "Cult of Able-Bodied Womanhood"***

Lucretia Mott's "Discourse on Woman" (1849) was written in response to one of the speeches delivered in a series of public engagements by William Henry Dana. Dana, who was a lecturer, traveled the East Coast delivering his lecture series, which included a speech that advised women to look to Shakespeare's Desdemona, Ophelia, and Juliet as

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94. Discussed further in Chapter Four

models to aspire to in regards to their innocence, tenderness, and love for man.<sup>95</sup> As *The Literary World* articulated:

Mr. Dana is not at all of the modern school, who affect to make Woman what she is not, never has been, and never can be, man and woman both, or perhaps we should rather say, simply man, for the unsexing philosophy ignores the woman altogether. Mr. Dana is old-fashioned enough to believe in essential difference of sex, mental and moral marked as the physical; which result in corresponding diverse, yet united, healthy development.<sup>96</sup>

Mott's attendance at one of Dana's events sparked a personal response, "Discourse on Woman," in which she expressed regret at hearing an intellectually beautiful argument engaging in sentiments that would "retard the progress of woman."<sup>97</sup> Mott established her argument against Dana using an expediency argument that claimed rights to education, leadership, and participation in law-making not based on woman's humanity and human rights, but as a means of improving women. The improved woman—able-bodied, autonomous, independent, and a good citizen—would then improve society,

Mott's first step towards autonomy was education for women. After quoting Catharine Beecher's "Suggestions Respecting Improvement in Education" (1829), Mott argued that public education had begun to change the interests of women. The old "sickly

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95. There is no material copy of Dana's lecture. But, there is an article about the lecture that I located in *The Literary World*, quoted in this chapter.

96. "Mr. Dana's Lecture on Woman," *The Literary World* 9 Mar. 1850: 6, 162.

97. L. C. Mott "Discourse on Woman." in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, ed, *Man Cannot Speak for Her Vol II* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1989): 74.

and sentimental” novels for women were no longer fitting, as they did not prepare the independent woman for the “sober duties of life”:

These duties are not to be limited by man. Nor will woman fulfill less her domestic relations, as the faithful companion of her chosen husband, and the fitting mother of her children, because she has a right estimate of her position and her responsibilities. Her self-respect will be increased; preserving the dignity of her being, she will not suffer herself to be degraded into a mere dependent. Nor will her feminine character be impaired.<sup>98</sup>

The first portion of Mott’s quote was a necessary refutation of the male-generated corporeally exclusive narrative used by Dana and other men during this time period, which argued that women would become unreliable and reproductively impaired (psychologically and physically disabled) if they were to be educated. Mott argued that giving a woman rights would not lessen her ability to perform her daily tasks, would not miraculously incapacitate her, or make her unable to fulfill her duties to her husband, children, and home. Mott fought this corporeally exclusionary rationale with her own CEN in an effort to dispel myths that men were perpetuating about the education of women; myths that would have society believe that education would make woman more dependent on man, not less.

The second half of her argument more clearly addressed the ideals of autonomy, as a woman who was able to fulfill all of her “duties” was one who would have an increased sense of self-respect (psychological soundness). As part of a CEN that was

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98. Mott 83.

more covert and female-generated, as opposed to the overt exclusions constructed by men, Mott's implication was that a woman who was unable to complete these tasks would/should lack self-respect. Furthering Mott's logic, this "independent" woman would also "preserve her dignity," which implied that the woman who did not meet these responsibilities was unable to claim dignity. Mott's woman was expected to work towards independence and not "suffer herself to be degraded into a mere dependent." Once again, the connection between dependence and degradation was at work in the movement philosophy. And, the connections Mott made between ability (physical, psychological, or intellectual) and autonomy served to reinforce what Cady Stanton and other white women's rights leaders had constructed a year earlier via the DoS and other public speeches presented at the Seneca Falls convention. But, Mott's use of disability also served a different purpose, in that it truly focused on a woman's physical abilities to fulfill her duties and the connection of her physical ability to her intellectual and psychological ability to fulfill all of her duties in a way that Cady Stanton did not address in the earlier work. Mott created a narrative that claimed woman's physical ability determined her intellectual and psychological ability. This was contrary to what Cady Stanton had done at Seneca Falls, refuting men's claims that woman's inferior size meant that they had inferior cognitive abilities. Mott's requirement that women fulfill their physical duties in order to be considered cognitively and psychologically able and fulfilled set a standard for womanhood that could not be met by any woman whose body or mind did not meet a full able bodied standard.

Mott complicated things even more by providing a stricter definition of womanhood, one that placed woman in the sphere of the home and reinforced the cult of

domesticity that had been put into place by white men's corporeal discriminations. She argued that extending a woman rights would make her a better woman, a better wife, a better mother, as long as and because she was not dependent. According to Mott, the woman who was independent was a woman, leaving the woman who was dependent, regardless of the reasons why, in a precarious position —was she a woman? Or was she a degraded and abject dependent? Mott's reliance on an ableist independence ideology as part of her discourse may have been empowering for the white able-bodied women in her audience, but it would be detrimental for the portions of the population that could not find themselves in her corporeally exclusionary "discourse on woman."

What would happen when the corporeal exclusions that women's rights advocates employed to discuss the dependent position of women became material? Moving beyond the figurative disabilities that women claimed regarding social and legal impairments to their autonomy and independence, how would women with material impairments or disabilities ever find empowerment in Mott's, or any other rhetors', words? As part of the Industrial Revolution, many women were entering the factory workforce. Injury and impairment was a regular occurrence among men and women working with machines that were often dangerous and deadly. Women's reproductive health issues were also a very real impairment for those women who were unable to control or plan their pregnancies in order to stay healthy and active. Finally, physical and cognitive impairments were also a reality for many women who were aging, and for those whose poverty resulted in malnutrition and physical deterioration.

Where would any of these women find themselves in Mott's definition of woman or her assumptions about a woman's duties and responsibilities in this time period? If

they saw themselves as dependent on their husbands or families, as unable to fulfill the moral and physical responsibilities and duties of the housewife, then how could they ever see themselves as independent? Would they always be considered dependent, abject, degraded, irresponsible and undignified? If so, could they ever have any rights? Mott's discourse did not allow any of these women to claim independence in the same way that non-disabled women could. Her reliance on an ableist independence ideology to define woman reinforced the philosophy already established by Cady Stanton and the DoS—dependence was a problem. And a female body that could not achieve the parameters Mott set out for independence would also be a problem.

Mott, like many other rights movement leaders, also engaged in corporeally exclusionary rhetoric that used narrative prosthesis and disability metaphors as a means to discuss and critique women's current place in society. While the actual word "disability" did not take on its modern meaning associated with physical limitations until 1915, according to numerous etymological sources, it was still used to denote an impediment or, as Simi Linton points out, a separation or an absence.<sup>99</sup> Prior to the more common use of disability, the word "handicap" was often used to refer to people with disabilities in the nineteenth century. As illustrated in much of the discursive work of the early white women's rights movements, specific medical or pathological labels were used to refer to those with disabilities—cripple(d), blind, deaf, dumb, retarded/enervated, diseased, mute, and/or paralysed. No single overarching word was used to describe the "disabled." Many of the women in the movement used the term disability to discuss the limitations placed upon them religiously, legally, and socially simply because they were

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99. See S. Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University, 1998).

women (usually married) and used the term to reinforce an idea that a dependent and disabled status was undesirable and abject.

“Discourse on Woman” demonstrated the social changes that were taking place in regards to the use of the term disability. Although it may not have had a direct connection to physical disability as we think of it today, the term was already being used to indicate impairment or impediment, whether literal or metaphoric:

In religious society her disabilities, as already pointed out, have greatly retarded her progress. Her exclusion from the pulpit or ministry—her duties marked out for her by her equal brother man, subject to creeds, rules, and disciplines made for her by him—this is unworthy her true dignity.<sup>100</sup>

Mott’s employment of the word “disabilities” coupled with “retarded” provided a metaphoric reference to women’s limitations and exclusions from the society of men, something that was unacceptable to many early rights advocates. She favored a disability rhetoric that employed the terms “paralysed” and “enervated,” in conjunction with the word disability:

We would admit all the difference, that our great and beneficent Creator has made, in the relation of man and woman, nor would we seek to disturb this relation; but we deny that the present position of woman, is her true sphere of usefulness; nor will she attain to this sphere, until the disabilities and disadvantages, religious, civil, and social, which impede her progress,

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100. Mott 87.

are removed out of her way. These restrictions have enervated her mind and paralysed her powers.<sup>101</sup>

Mott's disability metaphor followed a not-uncommon pattern of logic in the early women's rights movements —women were restricted by men, religiously, civilly, and socially, and these impediments have disabled them. Women's disabilities (inabilities, impediments, or restrictions) were discussed by many rhetors of this time. Mott's own use of the metaphor extended itself to paralysis and cognitive disability (enervation). While she may not have meant that there had been a literal paralysis of women's minds or a slowing of their thinking processes, she used the metaphor to demonstrate that women had been "retarded" in their progress as a result of the legal and social disabilities placed upon them.<sup>102</sup> Constructing this metaphor allowed for an ableist perspective on dependence that equated a negative identity with disability. The disabled body, figurative or literal, was marked as one that was undesirable and problematic. The meaning of the word retarded in 1849 was arguably not the same as today's problematic common usage, but her connection of "enervation" (paralysis of the mind) and "retarded" with women's progress demonstrated the changing register of meaning for all of these terms in this time period. As in the DoS and Cady Stanton's Seneca Falls speech, Mott made a connection between disability/impediments and an unacceptable status, which reinforced the fact that an enervated or paralysed mind or body made a woman ineligible to claim her true position as a woman, wife, and mother. If women's minds had been allowed to progress,

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101. Ibid.

102. In this situation, one could argue that Mott was employing a very early example of viewing disability from a social model perspective, as it was the legal and social constructions that disabled women, not their own physical impairments.

then they would have earned their rights. Until they were no longer disabled, they would remain in a state of undignified dependent disability.

This particular portion of Mott's argument, unfortunately, relied on a premise that established rights based on cognitive ability and development. When cognitive ability becomes a foundational marker of a person's value or ability to be a citizen within a society, then human rights and natural rights arguments cease to be productive. While Mott and many other rights advocates engaged an argument that they may have felt was necessary to refute the opposition's corporeally exclusionary claims of intellectual inferiority on the part of women and black people, their own cognitive ableism allowed them to claim rights while denying the same rights to anyone who could and would never be able to meet the standard. Using disability rhetoric to argue that a person's fitness and citizenship could and would be determined based on their intellectual and physical abilities created a dangerous precedent for future rights arguments.

A later quote in "Discourse" got to the heart of the problem with this rhetorical journey:

Let woman then go on—not asking as favor, but claiming as right, the removal of all the hindrances to her elevation in the scale of being—let her receive encouragement for the proper cultivation of all her powers, so that she may enter profitably into the active business of life; employing her own hands, in ministering to her necessities, strengthening her physical being by proper exercise, and observance of the laws of health.<sup>103</sup>

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103. Mott 96.

Mott's reference to the "scale of being" likely drew on the polygenetic work that became the focus of some scientists in the nineteenth century, work that believed "that human 'races' were of different lineages and suggested a hierarchy outlined in the 'Chain of Being' that positioned Africans between man and lower primates."<sup>104</sup> Works like Josiah Nott and George Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* would have been read in popular audiences, and, having been republished in nine editions, was indeed popular. If Mott's woman were to take her rightful place on the human scale of being, she would be equal with white men, but there would still be the possibility that black men and women, and people with disabilities, would be lower on the scale of being, still remained.

In order to achieve her rightful place on the scale of being, Mott's woman had to be physically intact and able to work "her own hands," deal with her own needs, "strengthen her body with exercise," and live healthy in order to be "profitable" in her "business of life." Connecting this part of Mott's speech to the earlier quote traces a not uncommon rhetorical strategy for women's rights advocates that deemed woman as "useful" if she was capable of doing the things listed above. Was a woman useless and unable to attain her "true sphere of usefulness" if she was unable to do these things? Did she then become that abhorrent dependent and degraded housewife that the leaders of these women's movements constructed as an ignorant and unenlightened, suffering, self-loathing, and undignified victim?

Following the construction of the dependent as abject in the DoS, Mott's use of a CEN also reinforced disability as the primary metaphor at play in the construction of the

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104. "History. Science: 1770s-1850s," *RACE. A Project of the American Anthropological Association* <[http://www.understandingrace.org/history/science/one\\_race.html](http://www.understandingrace.org/history/science/one_race.html)>.

abject. Mott claimed a disability status for woman that was not uncommon in this time period, and, once again, the disability was linked to dependency and abjection. It was the dependent woman who embodied all of these, and it was the dependent woman who was aligned with slaves in her role as wife, and it was the dependent woman who fulfilled the biologically generated raced and gendered claims of dependency that had long been espoused in this US society. It was the dependent woman who simultaneously claimed and rejected the embodied example of disability and dependency as conflated identities:

So with woman. She has so long been subject to the disabilities and restrictions with which her progress has been embarrassed that she has become enervated, her mind to some extent paralysed; and like those still more degraded by personal bondage, she hugs her chains. Liberty is often presented in its true light, but it is liberty for man [...] I would therefore urge, that woman be placed in such a situation in society, by the yielding of her rights, and have such opportunities for growth and development, as shall raise her from this low, enervated and paralysed condition, to a full appreciation of the blessing of entire freedom of mind.<sup>105</sup>

If “femininity and race are performances of disability,” as disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, Mott’s connection of the two supported the argument that notions of dependency drove this mode of thinking.<sup>106</sup> Race and gender were not in and of themselves markers of disability, but disability was often used as a marker for race and gender deficiency, and the performance of each was considered a

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105. Mott 88-89.

106. R. Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” in B.G. Smith and B. Hutchins, eds, *Gendering Disability*. Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

performance of disability. These bodies were impaired or deficient in their everyday performances. The most consistent deficiency claimed by white men, and women, was intellectual inferiority. These cognitively ableist beliefs not only aided the arguments produced by white men at this point in time, but are also evident in women's rights speeches, like Mott's *Discourse on Woman*. Mott called for women to be able to have a "full appreciation of the blessing of entire freedom of mind." Like Cady Stanton and other white women before her, Mott relied on the determination of human equality based in mental capacity. It was the freedom of the mind that would provide dignity, self-respect, ability, and fulfillment for women as equals to men. Unlike the indirect connections of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's work, however, Mott directly engaged with disability metaphors in the process of connecting dependency with race, gender, class, and ability. It was this connection that has been continually disputed by those who were being excluded throughout the earliest parts of the women's rights movements (black women, laboring women, and immigrants). These ableist rhetorical strategies would have long-lasting implications on the structure of civil rights legislation, as they would continue to allow particular bodies to be excluded in the process of granting rights some minority groups, but not others.

### **Redefining and Reinforcing Womanhood: Black Women's CENs of Intellect**

Some black women in the mid to late nineteenth century were free women. Free, in the sense they were not slaves, but not free from racism and corporeally exclusionary narratives that would eliminate them from white women's rights arguments, based on their race. One similarity in the discourses of black and white women's rights was the

necessity of defining womanhood. Black women were not just defining womanhood, but re-defining white women's definitions of womanhood. Their rhetorics worked to challenge white women's notions of womanhood and autonomy, but also continued to use corporeally exclusionary narratives in order to claim their own black able-bodied womanhood, at the expense of women with disabilities.

Almost twenty years prior to Sojourner Truth's famous, "Ain't I a Woman" speech at the 1851 women's rights convention, Maria Miller Stewart had spoken pointedly to white women in a mixed-race, mixed-gender crowd. "And why are not our forms as delicate, and our constitutions as slender, as yours? Is not the workmanship as curious and complete?"<sup>107</sup> Questioning the biological make up of woman and the definitions that their fellow women's rights leaders were using, both Stewart and Truth demonstrated that the corporeally exclusionary narratives used by women were just as problematic as those constructed by men. And, yet, both of these women continued to enact corporeally exclusionary narratives in their own work based on the able-bodied (Truth) and able-minded (Miller) disability rhetorics that each woman had relied on in order to establish her own womanhood, and that of women like her.

***Maria M. Stewart: Ableist Morality and Cognitive Ability***

*O virtue! How sacred is thy name! How pure are thy principles! Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. Blessed is the man who shall call her his wife; yea, happy is the child who shall call her mother. O woman, woman, would thou only strive to excel in merit and virtue; would thou only store thy mind with useful knowledge, great would be thine influence.*

~Maria Miller Stewart, 1831<sup>108</sup>

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107. See Guy-Sheftall, ed. 32; Kohrs Campbell, ed, *Man Cannot Vol II* 8.

108. M. M. Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build, 1831" initially produced as a pamphlet and then a publication in William Lloyd

In the early nineteenth century, the voices of black women may not have been as public and plentiful as those of white women, but the messages delivered by those voices were very similarly engaged in an argument for autonomy that relied on women's potential for mental acuity and intelligence. While many black women were still enslaved throughout most of the nineteenth century, the voices of women such as Maria Miller Stewart provide an excellent example of those leading the discussions of black womanhood, motherhood, and reform during that time period. Autonomy was central to their arguments against slavery, but it was also integral to their arguments for womanhood. In this project, Stewart's work, while coming fifteen years ahead of the DoS and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 1848 speech, provides an interesting connection to the ideological underpinnings of the abolitionist and women's rights movements. It also reveals that corporeally exclusionary narratives, based in intellectual fitness and achievement, were not just evident in white women's work from this time period.

Maria Miller Stewart, an African-American teacher and activist, is believed to be the first woman to speak publicly amongst mixed company of men and women, black and white.<sup>109</sup> Her part in the discourse of autonomy, heavily steeped in religious principles and messages of morality, would lay the groundwork for many black female speakers in the future (notably Mary Church Terrell, whose work will be discussed in Chapter 3). Very few scholars have written on the work of Maria Miller Stewart, whether this is because of her short-lived career or the fact that her work went unrecognized next to

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Garrison's *Liberator* in Guy-Sheftall, ed. *Words of Fire* and Kohrs Campbell, ed. *Man Cannot Speak for Her, Vol II*.

109. Kohrs Campbell and Guy-Sheftall both claim this as fact in their anthologies.

Sojourner Truth and Mary Church Terrell, I cannot say. But, those that have written about her have compiled her writings and speeches, providing a more historical than analytical account of her foundational work in black women's thought and discourse.<sup>110</sup> As Marilyn Richardson, scholar of women's intellectual and cultural history, states, "Her original synthesis of religious, abolitionist, and feminist concerns place[s] her squarely in the forefront of a black female activist and literary tradition only now beginning to be acknowledged as of integral significance to the understanding of the history of black thought and culture in America."<sup>111</sup> Although short-lived, Stewart's public career in activism addressed not only the freedom of enslaved black peoples, but also what she considered the necessary reform of the black race in regards to education, morality, and religion. And, reform was necessary in order to achieve autonomy.

Having come out of slavery, working hard for an education and a teacher's license, Stewart married a middle-class African American man, who died shortly after, leaving her a destitute widow because of state laws. Her activist work came in a time after her husband's death when Stewart felt called of God to be a warrior.<sup>112</sup> Stewart's connection of independence and intellect can be found repeated and revisited in the work of black women who followed her over fifty years later. For this reason, it is important to study her work.

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110. Stewart's life and work are discussed in Richardson's text below, anthologies such as M. Schneir's *Essential Feminist Texts*, Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire*, Kohrs Campbell's *Man Cannot Speak for Her Vol II*, and historical texts, such as Flexner and Fitzpatrick's *Century of Struggle*.

111. M. Richardson, ed, *Maria M. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

112. See Richardson

Stewart's 1831 "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build," initially produced as a pamphlet and then a publication in William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*, relied heavily on religion and the power of God to claim that the black race was not inferior:

Many think, because your skins are tinged with a sable hue, that you are an inferior race of beings; but God does not consider you as such. He hath formed and fashioned you in his own glorious image, and hath bestowed upon you reason and strong powers of intellect.<sup>113</sup>

Stewart was responding to cultural assumptions that were prevalent in the early 1800s, assumptions that the black race was inferior because of its skin color, but that the inferiority extended to intellect, physical health, and morals, as well. Racial constructions of corporeally exclusionary narratives often began with biological foundations and then connected to more figurative exclusions based in morality.

For Stewart, denying inferiority based on skin color was necessary, and it was also necessary to assert equality with those white people who were claiming superiority of not only physical but intellectual being. Stewart relied on God's bestowment of "reason and strong powers of intellect" to support her arguments for the emancipation and autonomy of black peoples. But, what about black people who were not part of those W.E.B Dubois would later refer to as the Talented Tenth?<sup>114</sup> Had God denied them the reason and intellect that they would need to rise above the inferior label they had been given because of their skin color? In her focus on reason and intellect as markers of

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113. Stewart, "Religion and Pure," in Guy-Sheftall, ed. 26.

114. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," from *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day* (New York, 1903).

equality, Stewart disputed inferiority based on skin color, but like the women's rights advocates who came after her, she reinforced notions of inferiority regarding mental acuity, reason, and logic. The long-standing belief among most women's rights rhetors that education could and would solve the problems of oppressed groups functioned as a cognitively ableist notion that discriminated against and elided those who were not able to meet the standards of "reason and strong intellect" that Stewart claimed as her foundation for equality and independence. As a result, Stewart inadvertently sanctioned one CEN while refuting another. Skin color should not be an exclusionary tactic, but intellect could be supported as a defining characteristic for corporeal inclusion, autonomy, and citizenship.

What was interesting about Stewart's work was the fact that she began by addressing what others had done or assumed about the black race, but she immediately turned the tables, and asked her fellow black people what they had done to be an example to their own people, particularly their children and youth. "Forgive me if I speak amiss; the minds of our tender babes are tainted as soon as they are born; they go astray, as it were, from the womb."<sup>115</sup> Stewart laid the responsibility for the "tainted minds" of black children at the feet of the parents, but soon turned the argument toward the behavior of daughters and claimed that a true and virtuous woman would change or influence a man to become a better man:

Where is the maiden who will blush at vulgarity? [...] Did the daughter of our land possess a delicacy of manners, combined with gentleness and dignity; did their pure minds hold vice in abhorrence and contempt; did

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115. Stewart, "Religion and Pure," in Guy-Sheftall, ed. 27.

they frown when their ears were polluted with its vile accents, would not their influence become powerful? Would not our brethren fall in love with their virtues? Their soul would become fired with a holy zeal for freedom's cause. They would become ambitious to distinguish themselves. They would become proud to display their talents. Able advocates would arise in our defense. Knowledge would begin to flow, and the chains of slavery and ignorance would melt like wax before the flames.<sup>116</sup>

Once again, Stewart focused on the mind, only this time it was the purity of mind in women that was her concern. For this very purity of mind would attract a man. And, a man in love would naturally become fired up about freedom, be ambitious and display his talents. Stewart laid all of this at the feet of women. I would like to particularly note the closing portion of her statement, "Able advocates would arise in our defense." Was Stewart saying that able advocates among men had not risen because women had not kept themselves pure and virtuous and failed to be inspirational enough for these men to step up and act in defense of their race? Was she saying that women were not able advocates? Her work certainly relied on religious principles and part of those principles was the belief in male leadership and female obedience preached in Protestant and Catholic churches in the US. But, she also followed up on her able advocates, claiming that knowledge would flow and chains of slavery and ignorance would melt as a result. Stewart certainly placed a lot of moral responsibility on young black women, even while she addressed the responsibilities of parents in her speech. Were women then to be

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116. Stewart, "Religion and Pure," in Guy-Sheftall, ed. 27-28.

blamed if men failed to achieve the intellectual and educational freedom that she claimed could be theirs? And, finally, was knowledge a requirement for an “able advocate?” Stewart’s words inferred that that was the case, as “an advocate would arise” and “knowledge would flow” were tandem concepts in her speech. I would assert then that many men, and women, would have been eliminated from the possibility of being an able advocate based on this requirement, particularly if, as Dubois later claimed, there would likely only be a Talented Tenth capable of fulfilling those roles.

Additionally, poverty was an enormous barrier to the acquisition of knowledge she required; poverty which caused underdevelopment in children, nutritional deficiencies that impeded brain and body growth, and financial limitations that would not allow for education. Stewart’s work precedes that of organized white women’s rights groups, demonstrating the similarities between abolitionist arguments and women’s rights arguments during the nineteenth century. Stewart, as many other abolitionist and women’s rights advocates, relied on the mind and knowledge as markers of ability, not just to defend her race, but to name those of her race who were acceptable and able advocates.

Stewart closed her charge to her audience (particularly black women), asking:

Do you ask the disposition I would have you possess? Possess the spirit of independence. The Americans do, and why should not you? Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted. Sue for your rights and privileges. Know the reason that you cannot attain them.

Weariness with your importunities. You can but die if you make the attempt, and we shall certainly die if you do not.<sup>117</sup>

As among the numerous women's rights leaders, the value placed on independence among black and white female reformers was very high. The spirit of independence was equated with the spirit of men who were bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted. While Stewart did not talk about dependence, what she said about independence can be read in opposition. To be dependent (as slaves and women would have been categorized) was to not be bold or enterprising, but to be fearful and daunted. To be dependent was to be weak. To be dependent meant you could not be an able advocate. Your intellectual abilities would determine whether or not you could be an able advocate, and whether or not you could be viewed as independent.

Stewart concluded her ableist rhetorical journey towards intellectual independence, quickly pushing her audience to exercise the agency at their disposal, to do "headwork" like Americans had been doing for two hundred years (white Americans), while black people had been doing the drudgery (physical work). Stewart did not say that labor was to be looked down upon, but she held up intellect as the ultimate goal and the defining characteristic for independence acquisition and success.

It should not be surprising that Stewart and other women valued education and knowledge, as it had been denied to them in US society for decades, even centuries. It should also not be surprising that Stewart pressed for knowledge as an ultimate goal when those of her race and sex had been deemed intellectually inferior either because of their skin color or their reproductive organs. But, in placing such a value on intellect and

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117. Stewart, "Religion and Pure," in Guy-Sheftall, ed. 29.

the acquisition of knowledge and education, Stewart and other female leaders did not account for those black people, particularly women, who may not have been able to achieve the standards set out for them because of cognitive disabilities or financial limitations. In doing so, Stewart reinforced the hierarchy of the mind/body dichotomy and supported common beliefs in “headwork” as better work and body-work as something that stripped a person of the possibilities of acquiring knowledge and education. If independence was connected to education, bravery and daring, then being dependent meant to be uneducated, ignorant, cowardly, and passive. Therefore, to be disabled was to be uneducated, ignorant, cowardly, and passive. Perhaps Stewart’s intent was not to directly connect these terms, but her construction of her arguments allowed for independence to be viewed as valuable because of the intellectual possibilities that were associated with it, leaving the uneducated and dependent to be viewed as “less than” in a society that already considered them inferior because of their race, sex, and/or disabilities.

***Sojourner Truth: Claiming an Able-Bodied Black Womanhood***

Maria Miller Stewart and Sojourner Truth demonstrated that the voices of the corporeally excluded (race) may have been excluded from the larger discourses that were being produced by the early white women’s movements, but they were not entirely silenced. Some of these voices have survived, been anthologized or canonized, and often used as “token” examples in women’s movement anthologies or collections that were and

are still dominated by middle class white women.<sup>118</sup> Perhaps one of the most well-known examples of the corporeally excluded voices in this time period was Sojourner Truth:

But what's all this here talking about? That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles or gives me any best place, and ain't I a woman?<sup>119</sup>

In the opening of her brief, but poignant speech, "Ain't I a Woman?", at the second national Woman's Convention in 1851, Truth critiqued the male-established CENs that were being used against women to establish them as physical inferior and in need of men to support them. But, she also then critiqued the CENs that were put in place by leaders like Cady Stanton and Mott, who defined woman and woman's duties based on their abilities to do physical and intellectual work, and those definitions excluded black women from that discourse of autonomy at work. Truth's speech provides a strong example of the counterargument that she and other black women utilized in order to claim their own autonomy:

Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man, and bear the lash as well—and ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen them almost all

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118. See M. Schneir, ed, *Feminism In Our Time*.

119. S. Truth, "Speech at the Woman's Rights Convention, Akron, Ohio, 1851," in K. Kohrs Campbell, ed. *Man Cannot Speak for Her, Vol. II* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1989): 99-102. This is the version of the text that I have worked with for this project. This speech is more commonly referred to as "Ain't I a Woman?" and will be referred to as such throughout this project.

sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but  
Jesus heard—and ain't I a woman?<sup>120</sup>

Challenging definitions of womanhood that had failed to account for her race, Truth disrupted notions of what it was to be a woman when she claimed a working woman's position in life, one that "plowed, planted, and gathered." Surrounded by women who likely had never done either of these things, Truth dispelled the "true sphere" of woman that had been reinforced by Mott, and many previous rhetors' arguments regarding women's rights.

As a means of challenging notions of womanhood and the right to autonomy, she moved towards a discussion of motherhood, engaging her audience in an empathetic argument. Her role as a mother was one that provided a connection with many of the women in her audience, but the fact that she had "seen them almost all sold off into slavery," crying out to no one who would listen, including white women, drew the dividing line between black women and the white women sitting in the audience that day. Truth addressed issues of independence that white woman did not even have to consider in this time period. As a mother, she was not free and her children were not free. Her slavery had been literal, whereas the slavery status that white women were claiming as part of their rights arguments was figurative. Truth had to address both of these types of slavery in her own work in a way that white women did not.

After questioning women about their definitions of womanhood and claiming her own right to status as a woman, Truth also challenged the requirements of intellect that men were using to keep women in subjection. She worked to disrupt the claims that

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120. Truth "Ain't I a Woman?" 100.

women were making about intellect and education being necessary for woman to “achieve her full potential”:

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it?  
[Intellect, whispered someone near.] That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or Negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?<sup>121</sup>

While Truth’s comments were most often directed to men in the audience who had made claims against women’s rights, her challenges were also a challenge to the women themselves. She not only questioned the validity of inferior intellect in the denial of women’s rights, but also Negroes’ rights. And, she invoked a more natural rights argument than the women who had spoken before because she questioned why intellect should even be a factor in determining rights.

The discursive documents produced by white women’s rights advocates demonstrated that the rights of black people, men or women, would not be upheld in a mid-nineteenth century white women’s movement doctrine, as most black people were not educated at this point in time, nor were they emancipated (independent), which precluded them from the ability to claim rights. But, Truth argued nonetheless that black women were women too, regardless of the definitions being provided by white men, and women, in this time period.

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121. Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?” 101.

While arguing against the definitions that women's rights rhetors were using, hers was still a voice of support for the early women's rights movement, and she made a final statement:

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down, all alone, these together (and she glanced her eye over us), ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again; and now they are asking to do it, the men better let them.<sup>122</sup>

As a voice in support of the movement, her speech has been saved as part of a documented record of the movement itself. But, as a voice of corporeal exclusion, her voice provided a more poignant entry point for black women into a rights discourse that continued to exclude them in many ways over the next one hundred and fifty years. She questioned definitions of womanhood, claimed womanhood for those who did not currently fit definitions set out by white men and women, and recognized that those who physically labored, those who lost their children to slavery or poverty, those who were uneducated or considered intellectually inferior, could still claim womanhood. Womanhood on a different set of terms, terms that were grounded in a corporeal existence that often excluded them not only from those rights of citizenship, but also those rights already provided to white, middle-class, educated women.

In her analysis of Truth's representations of herself, Meredith Minister, religion and disability scholar, articulates the underpinnings of ableism that Truth was fighting against.<sup>123</sup> First, "the gender hierarchy, which assumed the superiority of men, relied on

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122. Ibid.

123. M. Minister, "Female, Black, and Able: Representations of Sojourner Truth and Theories of Embodiment," *Disability Studies Quarterly* (Vol 32, No. 1 2012).

an ideology of ability” which Truth and other women had to fight against via a rhetoric that would disrupt the notion of male superiority, but would still reinforce the ableist assumptions about the human body. Second, “the racial hierarchy, which assumed the superiority of Caucasians, assumed an ideology of ability,” which Truth, unlike white women, had to address in order to construct her arguments for black womanhood. While Minister’s work addresses Truth’s choices regarding her own physical representation and the portraiture that she allowed to be produced of her assumedly in-tact body (when in fact, her right arm was significantly impaired due to an injury while she was a slave), this project concerns itself primarily with contradictions of Truth’s rhetoric and public speech.

Truth’s speech questioned the particular definitions of womanhood set out by the women’s movement in this time period; however, her discursive work could still be interpreted as a reinforcement of ableist ideologies (which often relied on dependence as a marker of disability). Her re-definitions of womanhood relied on an able-bodied woman, a strong healthy able-bodied woman who could labor all day in the field, suffer the lash as well as a man, bear children time and again, and still claim womanhood because she could physically endure all of it. This re-defining of womanhood claimed differences amongst women regarding race, gender, and class, but it could not withstand those corporeal experiences based literally in the material body – long-term illness, physical impairments, reproductive complications, and/or aging. Those bodies that did not meet the able-bodied requirements of woman’s expected contribution to society, whether it was in the home, the field, or at social functions, would still be excluded when the definitions for womanhood relied on a “whole, able-bodied” assumption of the female

body in question, as it does in Truth's speech. For this reason, it is important to note that being a corporeally excluded body did not automatically give anyone exemption from the same critiques applied to the dominant voices in this time period. While we must heed these voices for the import of their own criticism of the exclusions they have experienced, we must also recognize that they, too, were still enacting a corporeally exclusionary narrative when they relied on assumptions of ability or independence ideology to construct their own discourses of autonomy and womanhood.

Truth's work disrupted the intellectual standards that many women's rights arguments were using at this time, and stands alone in providing this type of critique to men's and women's arguments. But, relying on physical prowess as her counterargument to other corporeally exclusionary narratives added another layer to the rights argumentation already in existence. While she questioned, she also reinforced. Her critique, unheeded, lived as an early warning to the white women's rights movements in regards to the ideals of independence and the corporeally exclusionary narratives that were being enacted to garner rights. Her noted phrase, "Ain't I a Woman?" has endured as a question that has been asked over and over by multiple groups of women who have found themselves excluded by the discourses of choice in the organized women's movement, and could find itself in the disability rights movement year later, perhaps, slightly changed to, "Ain't I a Human?"

## **Establishing Rhetorical Tropes of Disability in Black and White Women's Rights Movements**

When the early women's rights advocates, black or white, used disability rhetoric, including disability metaphors, they enacted narrative prosthesis.<sup>124</sup> The assumption was that a disability or impairment was a problem and they wanted it fixed. Initially, they claimed their own social and legal disabilities or handicaps. But, to be crippled or paralysed, literally or metaphorically, was a problem that had to be solved. Using a disability metaphor as a means to connect with their audience allowed women's rights advocates to reject the role of disability assigned to them by men, as well as women's movement leaders, and enabled them in claiming a status for themselves that stood outside of the disabilities they once claimed, but had to reject. In their continued and shared usage of disability metaphor and/or narrative prosthesis, these earliest women's rights rhetors established tropes of disability within their rhetoric that identified independence and autonomy as a foil to disability and worked to aid them in claiming a legal disabled status, while rejecting a physically, psychologically, or cognitively disabled status in the process. Separating themselves from the disabled required the argument that they were not disabled themselves, and resulted in arguments for physical and mental fitness that proved women were equal to men and deserved the rights they were fighting for because they were not disabled.

There were similarities in thought among black and white women's rights leaders. Both Lucretia Mott and Maria Miller Stewart offered arguments steeped in morality and character qualifications that found intellect (cognitive ability) at the foundation of rational and moral choices and behavior. Without intellect, there was no morality. And, any woman who was rational would make moral decisions. Therefore, a woman who

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124. D. Mitchell and S. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

was immoral must not only be psychologically but also cognitively disabled. Both black and white women used this type of argument in order to bolster the respectability of women and to claim rights based on an intellectual and moral basis, for those women who could meet the standards. The arguments then functioned on two levels of ableism – cognitive and psychological – while immorality provided the cover for exclusion. These arguments helped in establishing a trope of disability as an inferior or dangerous status, and worked to elide any woman who could be labeled as mentally or physically unfit from the rights that both black and white women were working to claim.

And, Lucretia Mott and Sojourner Truth both relied on physically ableist assumptions of womanhood when they claimed two very different womanhoods, both of which relied on a woman's physical able-bodiedness as a marker of true womanhood. Mott set a standard for "woman" that required her to fulfill her wifely and motherly duties with her own hands and body, setting up the elision of those women who could not do that. While Truth's rhetoric is quite different from Mott's because black women were already fighting against racist rhetoric that claimed their bodies inferior, she still claimed her able-bodiedness as a marker of womanhood in order to establish her right to claim the same rights that Cady Stanton, Mott, and others were fighting for. As able-bodiedness was a prerequisite for independence, both of these women were part of the construction of independence/autonomy as a foil to disability, a trope that would continue in many forms throughout women's rights rhetorical work.

Both black and white women were also relying on intellect as a measure of value and standard for autonomy. Cady Stanton and Stewart both constructed arguments for rights based on intellectual standards that argued women needed only be given the

opportunity for education and knowledge and they would be equal to men. To these women, intellect was the standard that had to be met in order to claim autonomy and rights. And, beyond the arguments that were being made against women's physical inferiority (more complicated for Stewart as a black woman), these women asserted that the true measure was intelligence, excluding large numbers of women from their argument for rights. Truth's deviation from this intellectual argument was uncommon for black women's rhetoric of the nineteenth century, as many of the club women were arguing for the improvement of the black race via education and intellectual opportunities.<sup>125</sup> A reliance on intellect as a measure of worth also contributed to the construction of disability as an inferior or dangerous status that would construct any body that could be labeled as "intellectually inferior" as devalued and/or dangerous to society, therefore, unworthy of the rights being argued for.

While black and white women's rhetoric had much in common, it was also very different because of the racial divides among the two groups of women. Cady Stanton was still arguing against the foreign and ignorant masses (many of whom were black, slaves, or freed men and women), and few white women's rights arguments were overtly including race in their argumentation, unless they were speaking directly to an abolitionist audience. The ideology of ability at play among white women's arguments also included an assumed whiteness that had to be dispelled by black women who were fighting a very different battle. Truth and Stewart both acknowledged and addressed the

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125. Notably, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper did not always fall into the trap of ableist rhetoric that would exclude people based on their intellect, as she was often arguing with a community theme that included all and confronted white and black women for the exclusions they enacted on those who were weaker. This can be seen in her speech "We Are All Bound Up Together" at the Eleventh National Women's Convention in 1866. See S. Wilson Logan, *'We Are Coming' The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999). 44-69. But, she and Truth are atypical among black women's rights leaders at this time.

racism that had classified the black body as inferior, and worked to dispel that in their work. But, each woman went about their work differently – Stewart claiming that intellect would be the proof and savior of the black race, while Truth was questioning why her body wasn't just as womanly as a white woman's body, and why her small capacity for intellect might not be just as valid as one who has the capacity to hold more.

Each group of women tackled the mind/body dichotomy differently in their efforts to demonstrate a woman's right to rights. But, the commonality among both black and white women's rights rhetors was the claim for a valuing of the mind over the body, and a devaluing of the bodily experience in the process. With a focus on intellect as the marker for achievement and autonomy, the mind was privileged as the mechanism for determining value and ability. The body either had to be sured up as able-bodied (Truth), seen as purposeful for fulfilling duties of womanhood (Mott), or ignored in order to privilege the mind entirely (Cady Stanton and Stewart). Either way, the assumption of able-bodiedness allowed the body to become invisible in the arguments of women's rights rhetors, pushing the mind to the forefront of argumentation and constructing an argument about autonomy that required an able-bodied mind.

Autonomy arguments did not end in the nineteenth century, and they did not end when women achieved the vote in 1920. In fact, arguments for autonomy remain in today's women's rights argumentation. Autonomy and independence as a foil to disability was firmly established as a rhetorical trope within women's rights rhetoric in this earliest period of advocacy in the US. It is a trope that would continue in its initial form, but also develop and change over time, while still remaining a firm rhetorical construction regarding definitions of womanhood, whether black or white. Independence

and autonomy have been ideals of the women's rights movement since its formal inception in 1848 at Seneca Falls. A broader understanding of who could claim autonomy and thus rights has developed over time as more rights groups have asserted their own claims to rights by rejecting the corporeally exclusionary narratives that have been previously established. So, too, have multiple women's rights groups rejected the corporeally exclusionary narratives that elided their own bodies, while continuing to rely on other corporeally exclusionary narratives that included their bodies but excluded bodies with impairments, illness, and disease (disability). But, autonomy is still at the heart of most civil rights groups' discourses and rhetorical strategies. The inability to claim autonomy equals the inability to claim rights and citizenship.

For those women who could not achieve autonomy via the corporeally exclusionary narratives constructed by these early women's rights advocates, a new strategy had to be enacted. Somehow, more and more women had to be able to claim autonomy in order to claim citizenship. Race and class could not stand in the way. Arguments had to shift in order to include more women.

Reform movements established new rhetoric that prescribed a cognitive prerequisite for immigrants and other bodies that were not currently able to meet the prerequisites set out by early rights proponents. Claiming others as impaired, ill, or diseased as part of expediency arguments allowed women's rights rhetors to construct a rhetoric that would argue for societal betterment, and to claim their own rights within that process. The inferiority of those who were ill, diseased, or impaired, and the need to fix them, rose as a trope in the work of women's rights argumentation. It was not a new theme, and it was not used in isolation from the theme of autonomy. Rather, it was used

as a companion argument in order to establish the fitness of particular bodies for autonomy and citizenship, including voting rights. Intellectual ability would determine whether one was not only worthy of being a woman, but a responsible citizen. Without intellectual ability one could not be independent or autonomous, and could not be a valued and trusted member of society. This combination of the tropes of “independence/autonomy as a foil to disability” and “disability as an inferior or dangerous status” would transition into the reform arguments and limited suffrage arguments present in the next significant stage of women’s rights argumentation. It would allow rhetors to argue for their own rights as a measure to improve society, but would also rhetorically exclude any bodies that were unworthy of rights due to their lack of intellectuality, morality, and responsibility.

### Ch. 3: Voting and Reform: Cognitively Ableist Prescriptions for Citizenship

*The power relations with respect to female reformists are complex. The relationship between this group of privileged women and “feeble-minded women” illuminates the multiple layers at which oppression operated. By calling attention to their “feeble-minded” counterparts, female philanthropists had a direct hand in the marginalization of “feeble-minded” women.*

~Licia Carlson, 2001<sup>126</sup>

Preaching intellectual achievement as the route to autonomy, black and white women’s rights advocates set up an ableist us/them dichotomy that would reinforce standards that could not be achieved by all bodies/brains and, as a result, would invalidate the rhetors’ claims to advocate for all women. Although there were significant differences between white and black women’s narratives of women’s rights, there was also one significant commonality: both black and white activists emphasized intellectual achievement as a requisite characteristic for womanhood and citizenship. Indeed, intellectual accomplishment became a benchmark of sorts, a marker of the cognitive ableism that underlay the corporeally exclusionary narratives (CENs) constructed by both sets of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Focusing on voting rights, white middle- and upper-class women prescribed education and intellectual standards as markers of ideal womanhood, confident that it would eliminate the undesirable, immoral, and intellectually disabled voting constituency. Middle- and upper-class black women involved in the National Association of Colored Women also focused on the development of intellectual abilities as a means of achieving an elevated status for black women as citizens, but they often included physical abilities to support their arguments. Both sets of women argued for a

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126. L. Carlson, “Cognitive Ableism and Disability Studies: Feminist Reflections on the History of Mental Retardation” *Hypatia* 16.4 (Fall 2001): 124-146.

limited citizenship and constructed cognitive ability as a marker of not only womanhood but responsible citizenship.

Drawing on the work of both white and black women's movements, clubs, and organizations, this chapter argues that both black and white women's rights groups shared the presumption that women had to achieve a level of intellectual acumen to be voting members of society. Arguing for limited suffrage, suffrage only for the educated, allowed educated white women to claim rights for themselves while arguing that other women should work for intellectual achievement through reform measures in order to claim the same rights. Arguing for the value of woman to be defined by her ability to think also constructed a CEN that white and black middle- and upper- class women could embrace as a means of claiming rights. Ableist rhetoric that included disability metaphors, narrative prosthesis constructed CENs which served to reinforce their arguments, allowing for the exclusion of any material body that did not meet the rhetorical expectations.

Late-nineteenth-century discourses in some black and white women's groups revealed a shift towards a definition of womanhood that tied women specifically to the improvement of "the race" and society through intellectual achievement. The underlying assumption of whiteness, a CEN based in race, was evident in much of the work produced not only by white women, but also by black women. Working towards the ideals of white middle- and upper-class women was often the focus of black women's discourses, as well as those of white laboring women (although some fought against this). And, the assumption of able-bodiedness, a CEN based in physical and mental ability, existed in all aspects of ideal womanhood, whether the women were white or black.

Some leaders argued for intellectual achievement and standards in order to cloak underlying physically ableist sentiments and discrimination against groups they felt were physically and morally inferior. Others argued for intellectual achievement as a means of bringing their own people out of the ruins of slavery. And, some argued for physical assimilation as a means of survival in the labor force where intellectual ableism was not the concern, and physical abilities were the most important aspect of a person's existence. The CENs created by these arguments furthered the disability rhetoric of early women's rights rhetors and fortified the belief that one had to be physically and intellectually sound in order to claim citizenship rights.

### **Cognitive Ableism and Limited Suffrage: White Women's Movements**

White women's rights groups supported a prescribed set of standards that included reading, writing, child-rearing, and social and governmental awareness as the measure of good female citizenship. Women who did not already meet these requirements were counseled to improve themselves. A corporeally exclusionary narrative (CEN) created among white women's rights movements relied on the assimilation of women to a Caucasian, middle-class, able-bodied ideal that would support a story of productivity, autonomy and citizenship. Women were the primary caretakers and educators of children, the moral compass of the family, and it was their responsibility to raise their children properly and to have a home that was run efficiently and lived up to standards of cleanliness. Much of the discourse from white middle- and upper-class women's rights advocates (1890-1905) demonstrated a concern with the cognitive improvement of women as a step to improving society, but, as I argue, the focus on

cognitive ability became a means to limit suffrage for women (and men) that were undesirable because of their perceived disabilities.<sup>127</sup>

### ***The NAWSA, Limited Suffrage, and Cognitive Ableism***

White women's rights groups were not completely dormant during the Civil War, but they were focused on other political or social necessities, which differed depending on their location. Coming together to work for suffrage and other women's rights could not be a priority. With abolitionist movements fighting for freedom and rights for slaves, most women's rights groups took a back seat during this pivotal time in our nation.<sup>128</sup>

After the war, white women's rights groups began their suffrage efforts once again. According to Eleanor Flexner and Ellen Fitzpatrick, "The woman's rights leaders who had put away their cause for the duration of the Civil War believed that, when peace came, a grateful country would reward them, spurred on by the Republican Party." But, this was not to be so. Men involved in the women's suffrage fight, as well as the abolitionist fight threw their support towards male Negro voters, convinced it was "the Negro's hour."<sup>129</sup> As the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were put in place, and provided enfranchisement to more white men and to black men, women were still without suffrage, questioning the meaning "citizen" in both amendments.<sup>130</sup> The proceedings of

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127. See Kraditor *Ideas of Suffrage*, Kohrs Campbell *Man Cannot Vol I*, and Flexner and Fitzpatrick *Century of Struggle*. Each of these scholars have detailed the focus on discourses that argued women's intellectual capabilities had been denied and improving them was necessary in order to not only achieve the vote, but in order to improve the society.

128. See Kraditor *Ideas of Suffrage* and Flexner and Fitzpatrick *Century of Struggle*.

129. Flexner and Fitzpatrick 136-148.

130. Ibid.

the 1893 meeting of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), led by Susan B. Anthony as President, revealed their frustration with being passed over and lay out a plan for women to claim voting rights that embraced a CEN of cognitive ableism. Three resolutions stand out as particularly significant arguments regarding intellectual requirements for suffrage and the expectation of those who would be worthy of being granted voting rights:

Resolved, That without expressing any opinion on the proper qualifications for voting, we call attention to the significant facts that in every State there are more women who can read and write than all the illiterate male voters; more white women who can read and write than all negro voters; more American women who can read and write than all foreign voters; so that the enfranchisement of such women would settle the vexed question of rule by illiteracy, whether of home-grown or foreign-born production.

[...]

Resolved, That we recommend to all suffrage societies the advisability of procuring popular consideration of the principles we advocate by means of debates in the high schools, colleges, literary societies, young men's and women's Christian associations, women's clubs, etc., in their respective localities.<sup>131</sup>

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131. H.Taylor Upton, ed. *Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth Annual Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association* (Washington, DC: January 16-19, 1893).

Expectations of cognitive able-bodiedness were at the heart of all of these resolutions. Women expected men and women to be able to achieve standards of education that they, themselves, demanded as requirements for voting rights. These women's rights leaders addressed the "vexed question of rule by illiteracy" by asserting that the number of literate women (women who met the criterion of the CEN for suffrage rights) far outweighed any constituency of illiterate men who had been given the right to vote. If men were going to argue that allowing suffrage for women would constitute a country ruled by illiterate peoples, the women would counter that argument by claiming that there were more women who could read and write than illiterate male voters (white, negro, and foreign). These numbers of women, then, would counter the illiteracy among the groups of men who had all just been given voting rights, and were surely part of the "vexed question of illiteracy." Rather than counter the CEN men used to eliminate women as voters, women embraced it and the intellectual standards it required in order to gain voting rights for themselves, while still denying the same rights to any man or woman deemed intellectually disabled or inferior.

Focusing on literacy, or cognitive/intellectual ability, as a measure of value and worth, the women of the NAWSA were certainly expressing an ableist opinion on "the proper qualifications for voting" whether they claimed to or not. If there was a need for literate women to balance out the "home-grown or foreign-born production" of illiterate and ignorant men, then cognitive abilities were a marker of acceptable citizenship. In fact, they were *the* marker of acceptable citizenship. This CEN was part of a classic expediency argument that claimed people who had higher levels of cognitive ability would create a better society. They reinforced the CEN set up by women's rights

organizers previously, and were building on that CEN in order to establish intellectual standards for voting that many women would not be able to meet.

The expectation of intellectual achievement is also evident in the resolution to spread their principles by “means of debates.” The locations listed for debates were all either middle- to upper-class institutions or public locations that were generally only available to white, middle-to-upper class citizens. While high schools may have been public, the children of laboring men and women were often absent because of the necessity to work and earn money for the family. And, children or young men and women with intellectual or physical disabilities would not have been present in high schools, colleges, and/or literary societies in this time period. In these locations, their debates would only be “preaching to the choir,” and further reinforce the ableist expectations of intellect.

Three years later, speakers at the 1896 National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) convention made arguments supporting a more blatantly ableist desire for intellectual achievement as a measure of worthiness for men and women claiming voting rights. Still embedded in the “cult of true womanhood,” some women in the NAWSA saw motherhood as the female role that was integral in making claims for their rights. Reminiscent of Cady Stanton’s Divorce Debate speech almost forty years earlier, Emma Smith DeVoe’s very short public declaration demonstrated the continued reliance on arguments that claimed women’s independence was necessary for the production of healthy, smart, and non-disabled children:

So long as the mothers of the race live in an atmosphere of subserviency, in harmony and dependence, so long will they bear children to fill the

alms-houses, asylums and prisons. Teach the mothers self-reliance, let them aspire to individuality, guide them from the duty way up to the starry way: then will their offspring reflect soul-qualities—health, intellect, symmetry of form—that delight the world. Give to the mother the fullest freedom, because she cannot bequeath to her child that which she does not possess.<sup>132</sup>

Reiterating the expediency arguments of their predecessors, DeVoe and others claimed that mothers were the key to a “health[y], intellect[ual] and symmetr[ical]” future generation. Mothers needed to be free and intelligent, both able-bodied, in order to raise their children to understand and embrace freedom. Mothers could not provide for their children what they, themselves, did not possess. But, what did it mean for the mother to be free? What cognitive expectations would allow her to claim “freedom?” How could a mother achieve acceptable motherhood and citizenship? If a mother was to teach her children to “understand,” then she too would have to meet a particular set of standards for understanding herself. Without the education necessary, and without the cognitive ability to understand, she would never be able to fulfill this expectation. A cycle of cognitive and intellectual development was being prescribed; it started with the mother and was passed on to children. This process would result in children who were healthy, intellectual, and not physically disabled. And, those children would fulfill cognitive expectations, resulting in another acceptable generation of citizens.

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132. E. Smith DeVoe, “National Organizers Report,” in R. F. Avery, ed, *Proceedings of the Twenty-Eighth Annual Convention of the National-American Woman Suffrage Association* (Washington, DC: January 23-28, 1896). 56.

This line of argument of expediency argument had been taking place among organized women since at least the 1860 Divorce Debates between Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, and Ernestine Potowski Rose.<sup>133</sup> Perhaps the argument had become more subtly discriminatory in almost forty years' time, but the connection between "dependency, subserviency and inharmony" and the production of children who "fill [...] asylums and prisons," who did not "delight the world" intellectually or symmetrically, remained and continues well into the twenty-first century.

Smith DeVoe's brief speech at the 1896 convention may not have had as much impact on the women's movement itself as those that had come before and those that would come after, but her words demonstrate a lasting premise upon which the women of the NAWSA developed arguments for women's voting rights in the latest part of the nineteenth century. The premise was that dependence was connected to degeneracy, degeneracy was linked to disability (lack of symmetry and intellect), and that all three were sufficient to deny a person's right to suffrage. And, physical and cognitive development and transformation were a means to achieve the necessary autonomy that would deter degeneracy, and earn citizenship rights, such as voting.

The first resolution from the 1896 Convention embodied the expectation for rights based on cognitive standards:

1. That we demand suffrage for all citizens of the United States, women and men, upon reasonable conditions attainable by all, as a right and

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133. As discussed in Chapter Two.

not a privilege, under a government professedly based upon the consent of the governed.<sup>134</sup>

The use of the interrupter phrase “upon reasonable conditions attainable by all” established an underlying preference for limited suffrage. While they claimed it was a right and not a privilege, they still allowed for conditions to be set that were “reasonable” and should have been “attainable” by all. The reasonable, able-bodied, conditions were based on reading, knowledge of government, and rational decision-making, all of which would be unattainable by a vast majority of laboring men and women; all of which were able-bodied notions of a citizenship standard that intentionally excluded, rather than included large portions of the population. Carrie Chapman Catt’s contribution to the 1896 proceedings was her report on the “Course of Study in Political Science” offered to women:

The National-American Woman Suffrage Association desires to prepare every woman for an intelligent and conscientious use of the ballot [...] We would so imbue the woman voter with the solemn obligation of the citizen that she will teach it to her sons and daughters together with the Commandments [...] It is evidence sufficient that the women who are asking for the ballot intend to fit themselves to wield it intelligently and wisely. It is one of the many symptoms visible in our land today which seem to indicate that we are on the eve of a bright tomorrow, when

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134. H. M. Mills and I. Howland, “Manual for Political Equality,” in Avery, ed. 90.

intelligence and patriotism shall assert their right to control the destiny of the nation.<sup>135</sup>

Almost fifty years after Lucretia Mott claimed it was a woman's sacred duty to be a good mother and educated citizen, Catt echoed this foundational argument; however, she pushed the intellectually ableist rhetoric more than Mott did. Connecting intelligence and wisdom to patriotism and the destiny of the nation, Catt re-constructed the same disability rhetoric that had been used by Cady Stanton and others previously. As part of the official NAWSA report, Catt's speech serves as an exemplar of the NAWSA's philosophy and perspective on women's need to intellectually assimilate and the exclusion of women who could or would not. She began her report by stating the NAWSA's desire to educate and prepare women to use the ballot intelligently and conscientiously. The NAWSA itself was prepared to cognitively reform women so that they might be deserving of the ballot via its "Course of Study in Political Science." Catt's report on the course centered on its goal of training women to understand and believe a particular philosophy regarding voting and citizenship. Reforming women to embody responsible motherhood and imbuing the belief that a patriot should be intelligent and responsible set a precedent for women that demanded a particular level of intelligence and understanding that eliminated many women from claiming the right to vote.

As an organization, the NAWSA appeared to support the limited suffrage recommendations espoused by leaders of white women's suffrage groups at the time. Although some were less blatant in their calls for educational requirements and their desire to eliminate illiterate and ignorant voters, "whether of home-grown or foreign-born

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135. C. Chapman Catt, "NAWSA Report." in Avery, ed. 29-33.

production,” others like DeVoe and Catt were very clear about their desire to make sure that the destiny of the nation rested on an able-bodied, intelligent voter (that reflected NAWSA beliefs), and that allowing illiterate voters to dominate the ranks would continue to result in depravity and social disease. The connection between cognitive disability and depravity should not go unrecognized, as it is a premise that had already been relied upon and would continue to be relied upon in women’s rights discourses. Able-bodied cognitive standards were necessary and the NAWSA was proud to provide classes that would shape women into their idea of a desired citizen, a patriot who was intelligent.

### **The Woman’s Journal Debate on Limited Suffrage**

In 1894-95, a significant and heated debate among women’s rights leaders took place on the pages of *The Woman’s Journal*. It had been almost fifty years since Seneca Falls, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton was still arguing that women’s suffrage was the solution for women—the vote would not only provide them with independence, but also provide the ability to claim even more rights via the vote. Her arguments, however, relied on physically and cognitively ableist understandings of independence. Setting an intellectual requirement for all people was important as a means of extending the vote to more women, while also denying it to those considered intellectually inferior and morally questionable. Intellectual requirements for voting were at the heart of each and every argument presented in one very extensive debate about limited suffrage from 1894-5. While there are differences and a clear refutation of particular philosophies of limited suffrage, regardless of the rhetor creating his/her case, some type of ableist ideal of intellect was championed as a means by which women could gain the vote.

On September 1, 1894, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's letter to the editor (Henry Browne Blackwell) titled, "Educated Voters Needed," started an extended debate in the *Journal*, proposing an educational/intellectual requirement for voting rights. As part of a consistent movement towards expediency arguments among women's rights advocates, Cady Stanton argued that mandating an educational requirement, or level of intellectual achievement, would help to control the vote and better society. Cady Stanton, anticipating detractors, provided three counter-arguments to support her suppositions: 1) restrictions based on age were really no different than restrictions based on education; 2) an educational requirement would counteract men's claims that allowing women to vote would result in even more ignorant people voting than there already were; and, 3) there should be no excuse for ignorance because public education was now free and compulsory for everyone.<sup>136</sup> Rhetorically speaking, arguing with counterarguments strengthened Cady Stanton's position dually, for she could present her own arguments in the process of disproving the arguments that men were using against women's votes. Utilizing a corporeally exclusionary narrative to fight a corporeally exclusionary narrative, however, only succeeded in denying rights to those women who also did not meet her able-bodied requirements for voting.

Cady Stanton's arguments relied on ableist assumptions of intelligence (cognitive ableism). She was in denial about the fact that ignorance existed because of race and class disparities that resulted from the racist, classist, and ableist institutions and structures that the US was built on. Her expediency arguments drew on narrative prosthesis and disability metaphors as a means of defining raced and classed bodies as somehow

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136. E. C. Stanton, "Educated Voters Needed" *The Woman's Journal* (1 September 1894): 276.

intellectually disabled because of their lack of education and because of their likelihood of dependency. Her arguments utilized disability as a metaphor for inferiority and succeeded in eliminating the races and classes of those she felt were inferior in the process. While she and others may have moved away from the physical disability disparagements aimed at race, her use of disability rhetoric still constructed a cognitively ableist prerequisite for voting and citizenship rights. As Douglas Baynton explained in “Disability and the Justification for Inequality,” “disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them...non-white races were routinely connected to people with disabilities, both of whom were depicted as evolutionary laggards or throwbacks.”<sup>137</sup> Without making blatant claims of racial inferiority based on the black or foreign bodies, the justification for inequality that Cady Stanton and other rights advocates relied on was intellect. The lack of intellectual ability would be seen as a disability worth discriminating against for the sake of the country and its destiny, without the accusations that women were targeting a particular race or class.

One concern among middle- and upper-class educated women was the recent abolition of property requirements in order to claim voting rights, via the Fourteenth Amendment. Without this requirement, the vote had been opened up to all “male citizens twenty-one years of age,” employed or unemployed, wealthy or poor, propertied or not, educated or ignorant.<sup>138</sup> This open door allowed for men who were part of a “violent, unreasoning, ignorant, worthless class”<sup>139</sup> to participate in a right, according to Cady

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137. See Baynton.

138. Flexner and Fitzpatrick 136-137.

139. Cady Stanton, “Educated Voters.”

Stanton, that middle-class, intelligent, civilized, reasoning women were still being denied. Cady Stanton had already made her opinions about the lower class evident in the 1860 Divorce Debates, but these newer, targeted arguments could be much more subtle because they appeared to be only arguments for education. In reality, the arguments functioned as hidden corporeally exclusionary tactics, targeting particular races and classes without being overtly racist or classist, because they relied on cognitive, rather than physical, ableism to establish the need for cognitive assimilation.

Cady Stanton claimed that her suggested requirements would not interfere with the “popular theory of ‘universal suffrage,’ of ‘suffrage a natural right,’” she nonetheless suggested the following reasons for having an educational/intellectual qualification:

1. It would limit the foreign vote
2. It would decrease the ignorant native vote by stimulating the rising generation to learning [...]
3. It would dignify the right of suffrage in the eyes of our people to know that some preparation was necessary for the exercise of so important a duty<sup>140</sup>

Cady Stanton couched her concern about the foreign vote by following up with the ignorant natives, providing a cognitive basis for the exclusion of foreigners, rather than blatantly saying being foreign was the problem. But, it was just another attempt to reinforce the CEN based not only on intellectual grounds, but physical grounds, as well. Foreigners who didn't speak the language would automatically fail to earn the right to

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140. Cady Stanton, “Educated Voters.”

vote because they would not have the ability to read and write in English, in order to pass any type of test. Cady Stanton provided evidence of the dangers of ignorance, citing:

The intelligent, organized laboring men were hampered in the recent strikes by the violent, unreasoning, ignorant voters, whose folly they could not control. It is the interest of the educated working-men, as it is of the women, that this ignorant, worthless class of voters should be speedily diminished. With free schools and compulsory education, there is no excuse in this country for ignorance of the elements of learning.<sup>141</sup>

This was not the first, nor the last, time that Cady Stanton would refer to immigrants and other laboring bodies as violent or unreasoning, ignorant, or worthless. Her use of intelligent and organized laborers as a foil to violent and unreasoning voters created an ableist divide among laboring men (and women), perpetuated by intellectual ability. Referring to the workers as ignorant and worthless rhetorically linked a person's value to their cognitive abilities. With this coupling, Cady Stanton effectively discarded any body that could not cognitively assimilate, linking disability to degeneracy and worthlessness.

Cady Stanton's claim that public education was free and mandatory was far from accurate. Education history does not demonstrate that free and compulsory education existed in all states, or that it was even compulsory in most states. It was not until 1851 that Massachusetts passed its first compulsory education law, and the South did not even begin offering free public education until after The Civil War. According to the Applied Research Center, now rebranded as Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation, between 1893-1913 school boards in major cities shrunk in size, local

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141. Cady Stanton, "Educated Voters."

representatives were eliminated (eliminating representation from immigrant communities), and school boards became more populated with people from the richest classes and wealthy professionals.<sup>142</sup> Education would continue to be available to those who were already educated, and the cognitively lacking laboring public would continue to be excluded from voting rights because they were denied the free and mandatory education that Cady Stanton claimed as the intellectual savior of the lower classes.

Cady Stanton closed her editorial, quoting a recent speech by Reverend Charles G. Ames, asking for a basic qualification test for future voting applicants—a test that would require new voters to know the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of the government, but would not be required of those men who already had voting privileges.<sup>143</sup> After all, if public education was free and mandatory, everyone should have known this information. Failing to account for those US born children and adults who never received public education, learned to read or write, or were too busy working for survival to be concerned with the particulars of governmental structure, Cady Stanton’s cognitively ableist prerequisites for voting would achieve her desired goal—keeping the ignorant, worthless laboring classes from having any voice in social and political circles.

That same day (September 1, 1894) in the *Journal*, in an adjacent column, Mary Ware Allen’s editorial, “Ask for Qualified Woman-Suffrage,” also supported an educational requirement, if only for women, amongst other limitations and requirements for voting rights. Allen’s arguments may seem very familiar to the late twentieth century discourses surrounding welfare reform. She claimed, based on her own “extensive” work

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142. “Historical Timeline of Public Education in the US,” *Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation* 17 October 2015. Web. 1 January 2016.

143. The author believes that most of us in 2011 would fail this test miserably and few US citizens would have the right to vote.

in charities, that “voting would be an incentive to the worthy poor.”<sup>144</sup> She denied Cady Stanton’s argument that all women should vote on the same terms as men by providing the following example: “If one child eats something bad, should all the rest have to eat something bad, as well, or go hungry?”<sup>145</sup> The country had already made the mistake of opening voting to ignorant lower classes of men, Ware argued. They should not make the same mistake with women. Ware argued for limitations only on women’s voting and allowed for men’s voting rights to remain intact.

Her argument, however, involved restrictions on more groups of “undesirables” than Cady Stanton’s. She added to the exclusionary list that Cady Stanton had already established, claiming that anyone who had been in prison or a “house of reform” should not be allowed to vote, and she denied the right to vote to anyone who had received non-medical City or State aid in the last two to three years. Drawing on her charity work experiences, she claimed “illness and misfortune which are temporary all too often turn into permanent pauperism and deterioration of character.”<sup>146</sup> Her factual evidence for this statement was her knowledge of the women she helped during her charity work, women who received charity and, who, Ware claimed, would rather not go find work and would refuse to go when work was found for them. “They’d rather suck the system getting something for nothing. This is their only economic concern.”<sup>147</sup> Ware’s generalizations about women who received aid from charity organizations were not really

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144. Mary Allen Ware, “Ask for Qualified Woman-Suffrage,” *Woman’s Journal*, 1 Sept 1894: 176.

145. *Ibid.*

146. *Ibid.*

147. *Ibid.*

any different than Cady Stanton's claims about the lower class, working people as "ignorant, unreasoning, violent, and worthless." But, Ware appeared to target women specifically in her argument, perhaps because she was arguing against Cady Stanton's claims that all women deserved the same rights to voting that all men had, as long as they met the educational requirements she endorsed. Whereas Cady Stanton argued that instituting an educational requirement for all would provide limitations against the ignorant class (male and female), Ware preferred to rock the boat a little less by only targeting women who were lower-class and inferior. Ware's assertions that illness, which was temporary, often led to "permanent pauperism and deterioration of character" also provided a link between disability and a person's character and value. Physical ailments led to psychological failings and questions of morality. Failing to recognize the institutional barriers for those who were already poor, and the fact that an illness might very well cause a laboring family to descend into pauperism because of the financial toll it takes on the family's welfare, much like Cady Stanton, Ware connected pauperism and deteriorated character. From the point of view of both women, a person's ability to meet the physical and cognitive requirements of independence determined whether or not they would be viewed as morally (psychologically) disabled, as well. Without the prescribed intellect, a person would make unsound decisions which would question their psychological ability. And this inability to make moral choices would decrease their value to society and to the destiny of the nation. Thus, they should not be allowed to vote.

It should not be surprising that there were male voices participating in the *Journal* debate over education and voting rights. It was not just men's voices that Cady Stanton

and Ware relied on to support their own writing, although it is important to note that they did rely on these voices as part of their argument, perhaps in an attempt to demonstrate male-support, which may help to persuade not only men, but leery female readers. Men's voices had been part of the women's movement since its inception, as opponents and proponents. Their voices either worked to incite the anger of women activists, temper the arguments of women, to calm the radical, or to enhance the rhetoric.<sup>148</sup> As the editor of the *Journal*, Henry Browne Blackwell need not speak directly for any cause. He had only to choose which letters and essays he would publish to influence the women's rights movement.

On October 27, 1894, editor Henry Browne Blackwell chose to publish "Class Legislation Never Safe," a letter to the editor by Celia B. Whitehead, described by Blackwell as "another brief and forcible argument against limiting the demand for woman suffrage by an educational qualification, or by any limitation not required of male voters."<sup>149</sup> Whitehead, claiming to agree with Ana Gardner (from September 1), actually appeared to be vehemently against what Gardner had written previously. She drew on Wendell Phillips, to claim that, "an educated class could not be trusted with the interests of the illiterate; that each must speak for itself."<sup>150</sup> She furthered her point by stating, "So far as I have been able to observe, intellectual culture does not increase a sense of justice in human beings. Sometimes it seems rather to obscure it."<sup>151</sup> Whitehead ended her brief editorial calling upon the movement to focus not on getting rid of the ignorant voters, but

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148. See Browne.

149. Celia B. Whitehead, "Class Legislation Never Safe," *Woman's Journal*, 27 October 1894.

150. *Ibid.*

151. *Ibid.*

on the “party managers” who “unscrupulously use ignorant voters.” This singular voice in the *Journal*, in the midst of all the other proponents for a limited suffrage amendment, was just that. Singular. This argument was also reminiscent of Sojourner Truth’s 1851 assertion that everyone deserved their portion of rights and womanhood or citizenship, regardless of their intellectual ability. Surrounded by the arguments of more well-known women’s rights voices, Whitehead’s speech could have gone unnoticed, had Blackwell decided not to publish it.

Cady Stanton’s “Educated Suffrage Justified” (November 3, 1894) began, “Universal suffrage is the first truth and only basis of a genuine republic.”<sup>152</sup> But Cady Stanton soon clarified her position by claiming, again, that there were certain restrictions that could be enacted upon this right without violating the general principle of universal suffrage. Cady Stanton explained that over time in many states, there had been restrictions in place that disqualified certain “classes” from voting rights. Her list included, “idiots, lunatics, criminals, paupers, minors, men who bet on elections, clergymen (by custom not constitution) those not possessing \$250, those who could neither read nor write, all black men, and all women black and white.”<sup>153</sup> Cady Stanton claimed that the first nine of these disqualifiers were “easily escape[d].” In fact, her list of easy remedies for these nine existences only took up the next eighteen lines of her essay. Her solutions included, “modern scientific appliances” for the idiot to “develop sufficient intelligence and provide for his own wants and protect his rights” and “The lunatic may become sane.”<sup>154</sup> Her counter argument was that sex and color were

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152. E. C. Stanton, “Educated Suffrage Justified,” *Woman’s Journal* 3 November 1894.

153. *Ibid.*

insurmountable, and therefore, limiting suffrage based on these was contrary to the ideals of a true republic. Her opening statement was reinforced at this point with her explanation that regulating suffrage was an acceptable situation, denying it outright was not. Without sex and color to provide justification for inequality, Cady Stanton focused on the class and disability markers of those bodies that “should” be able to surmount their obstacles.

Cady Stanton was less subtle in this essay, revealing her underlying motives for supporting limited suffrage, as well as her plan to keep immigrants from voting for at least two years from the time they entered the country:

With the ignorant and impecunious from the Old World landing on our shores by hundreds every day, we must have some restrictions of the suffrage for our own safety and for their education before they take part in the administration of the government. Every man of them should be compelled to read and write the English language before they are allowed to register themselves as voters [...] If a foreigner can read and write the English language intelligently, he has taken the first step towards understanding the spirit of our institutions and the duties of citizenship.<sup>155</sup>

Cady Stanton was responding to Ana Gardner’s previous opposition to her September 1<sup>st</sup> essay. Her proposal, by her own estimates, would take two years for foreigners to fulfill, providing a buffer against their assumed ignorance in voting. In response to previous discourse from Ana Gardner<sup>156</sup>, she directly denied that her limitations and requirements

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154. Ibid.

155. Ibid.

were classist in nature by claiming the law would affect “alike men and women, black and white, rich and poor, foreign and native,” further rationalizing that such a law would “make our whole people more homogeneous and united.” She closes this essay with an analogy about the necessity of skill and intelligence when navigating a ship on a stormy sea. “Just so in the State we need the highest intelligence and morality to govern a nation with justice and wisdom.”<sup>157</sup> Once again, the destiny of the nation relied on an intelligent and wise voter to fulfill their patriotic duty.

Cady Stanton’s work here equated the knowledge of the English language with the ability to understand what freedom was, what a republic was, and what dutiful citizenship was. In essence, her words worked to reinforce the fear of the unknown Other and to equate the English language with intelligence and understanding. Her ableist ideal of cognitive ability was not just about literacy, but about a prescribed literacy in the English language that would be controlled by education provided in English; one that would leave most immigrants unable to vote for their entire lifetimes. And, according to Cady Stanton, this inability to vote was not because they were foreign or lower classed; it was because they did not fulfill an able-bodied prerequisite of intelligence that would mark them as valuable and worthy.

Ana Gardner’s November 17, 1894 “A Reply to Mrs. Stanton” initially argued that ignorant women were paying taxes and owed their allegiance, so they should have been allowed to vote. She questioned Cady Stanton’s “class legislation” as the rule of the

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156. I have been unable to find a previous essay or editorial by Ana Gardner in *The Woman’s Journal*, but her response to Cady Stanton’s rebut comes on November 17, 1894 and will be discussed below. It is possible that the communication between the two women may have been in another public venue or in personal communication.

157. Cady Stanton “Educated Suffrage Justified.”

privileged class over the lower class via voting. She did admit that there were real dangers and concerns surrounding the ignorant vote, but asserted that there was a “magnitude of danger” that would come from a “Republic” ruled by a “brain aristocracy.” She argued that legal enactments, like those enforced on “children, idiots and other imbeciles” could be enacted to prevent “low foreigners” from voting immediately upon entering the country. She was still for intellectual limitations, just not direct educational requirements for all. Her argument made the case that, in a true republic, a large population, male or female, could not be denied the right to vote, or the republic would cease to be a republic. But, Gardner’s argument, while defending the uneducated, still allowed for those who were considered cognitively disabled (idiots and other imbeciles) to be excluded from voting rights. Suffrage, for Gardner, should and could be denied to the disabled, but not the black, foreign, or the poor.

On December 8, 1894, there was once again an entry from Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Cady Stanton’s arguments in this December rebuttal were much the same as those that came before, although she does begin to utilize the phrase “best class” when referring to women. However, her previous requirements indicate that she does not include all women in her “best class.” For, women who do not meet Cady Stanton’s and the NAWSA’s standards for voting cannot be included in this particular class of women. In the end, she also established “our own men” as the enemy as long as they stood in the way of voting rights for women – intelligent and cognitively accomplished women.

One of the final discursive episodes in this debate was “An Open Letter to Mrs. Stanton” written by Cady Stanton’s daughter, Harriet Stanton Blatch, on December 22,

1894.<sup>158</sup> Among the women of the movement, Stanton Blatch appeared to be in direct and clear conflict with her mother's assertions regarding limited voting rights for all people. Stanton Blatch's letter confirmed that Cady Stanton's opinion was one that was taking root in a growing portion of the population.

Stanton Blatch claimed that an educational requirement, like the previous property requirement, was "fetich" (like the Golden Calf worshipped in the Bible). Once one was torn down, another was erected to take its place. White middle- and upper-class able-bodied men and women would continue to place some barrier in the way of the laboring class and black voters in order to keep them from voting. First, for men it was property, but that was eradicated. Now, it was the corporeally exclusionary prerequisite of sex, but women were fighting against that. In the process, women were setting up their own CENs of intellect and education, which would preclude not just women, but many men from voting rights in the process. Stanton Blatch charged her mother to reread her own letter and pointed out the fallacies of her argument, "throughout you imply that if a person can read and write, he is 'enlightened' and 'educated,' and if he cannot read and write, he is 'ignorant.'"<sup>159</sup> Stanton Blatch addressed both fallacies in her mother's argument, claiming that the requirement of reading and writing, once fulfilled, did not guarantee that one would not be ignorant. The ability to read and write did not automatically erase ignorance. She also argued that "many a man, without a sign of the R's about him, is gifted with the sterling commonsense and abiding honesty which the

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158. Elizabeth Cady Stanton had asked her daughter for her thoughts on her November 3, 1894 essay, and this letter was Stanton Blatch's response.

159. Harriet Stanton Blatch, "An Open Letter to Mrs. Stanton" *The Woman's Journal* 22 December 1894.

school of life's experience teaches."<sup>160</sup> Stanton Blatch's next challenge to claims of "ignorance" on Cady Stanton's part was directed at the foreigners that Cady Stanton had claimed were all ignorant because they could not read or write the English language. Stanton Blatch reminded her mother that the European nations had their own public school systems and that most of the foreigners that arrived in the US had received just as much education as those in the US. She challenged her mother's logic by switching the tables on her argument:

I think I am right in saying that you cannot read, write, or speak a word of German. Now, I not only affirm that you would not be an "ignorant foreigner," if you landed in Germany, but I declare, If you were given the franchise there, you would be the most intelligent voter in the whole Empire on women's questions.<sup>161</sup>

Stanton Blatch further challenged her mother's argument that "the ignorant classes do not need the suffrage more than the enlightened, but just the reverse." She challenged the idea that an educated ruling class was what was needed by providing an example of the US South prior to the Civil War, "Before the war, the whole southern section of the United States was ruled by its men who could 'read and write.' They had it all their own way, and what did they do with their power?"<sup>162</sup> Stanton Blatch's chastisement of her mother's arguments challenged the racist, classist underpinnings of what Cady Stanton was trying to achieve, without really addressing the underlying ableism. She asserted

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160. Ibid.

161. Ibid.

162. Ibid.

that foreignness did not equate with ignorance; neither did financial status. But, Stanton Blatch still relied on ignorance (cognitive ability) as a marker of invalidation. Her arguments against her mother did not claim that the ignorant should be allowed to vote. They claimed that a lack of formal education and knowledge of the English language were not markers of ignorance. Stanton Blatch still left the truly ignorant and cognitively disabled out of her arguments because as part of this corporeally exclusionary narrative of independence and autonomy, they could not be argued for.

Lest we still believe that Stanton Blatch was innocent of preaching the rhetoric of cognitive ableism, we must attend to her argument for standards based in morality. As she argued against her mother's advocacy of an "educated vote," Stanton Blatch herself supported a government based in morality:

[...] if it were possible to separate the truthful, the upright, the conscientious and the loving from their weaker fellow men, I would advocate a government of an aristocracy of the moral; for I would not, and on this ground, that government is not the end of men, but merely a method of expressing collective thought, and achieving concerted action.<sup>163</sup>

While Stanton Blatch was clearly in opposition to her mother's position on a limited vote, she still demonstrated a desire for a government run by politicians who met moral standards, if it were possible to separate the moral from the weak. Questions about definitions for "truth," "upright," "conscientious," and "loving" must be asked because women's rights arguments from the past, including her mother's, equated independence

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163. Ibid.

with morality. And, those arguments provided the foundation for the current women's rights argumentation, which was why cognitive ability was predominantly the requirement of Cady Stanton and other white women's rights advocates. Cognitive ability could and would lead to autonomy, cognitive ability also allowed people to make good and moral decisions; therefore, cognitive ability was directly linked not just to an autonomous status, but that an autonomous status relied on the ability to make moral decisions, supporting a psychological ableism that was linked to morality.

Her argument went further when she claimed that collective thought was not possible if anyone who was capable of thought was excluded from the process. She drew on an old adage to advance the argument, claiming that a society was only as strong as its weakest link:

Hence the wisdom of having the weakest link brought out in full light of day, freely showing its weakness, so that flaws may be corrected. If the strong links never were made to feel the detriment to themselves, individually and collectively, of the existence of the weak, nothing would be done to improve the feeble.<sup>164</sup>

Here, Stanton Blatch joined her mother and all the other men and women enjoined in the limited suffrage battle, as she, herself, was calling for an awareness of the cognitively disabilities of the weakest link. Identifying the cognitively and psychologically disabled weakest link and fixing its flaws were necessary to the collective thought that government should be engaged in producing. Further, Stanton Blatch identified these disabled weakest links as detriments to the strong, and claimed that the strong had to

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164. Ibid.

acknowledge the weak in order to improve not only the “feeble,” but the stronger class, as well. The very existence of the weak was a detriment, had to be identified, brought out into the light, exposed, and fixed. The “whole” could not be successful unless the “parts” were all physically, cognitively, and psychologically able-bodied. While arguing against her mother’s version of classist and racist cognitive ableism, Stanton Blatch reinforced a cognitive ableism that targeted those who were cognitively disabled, which was also steeped in judgements of morality, and still exists in US society.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s final response to her daughter in the January 5, 1895 edition of the *Journal* functioned almost completely as a counterargument to opponents of limited suffrage. While there were voices pushing back against limited suffrage, the voice from this essay debate that remains most well-known in white women’s rights history is that of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Cady Stanton’s daughter and the other women whose voices were represented in *The Woman’s Journal* were drowned out by Cady Stanton’s and those other women’s in support of limited suffrage in multiple forms. Cady Stanton was still a leader in women’s rights movements, having continued arguing for women’s rights through the 1860s and playing an integral role in the NAWSA. Her work functions as a looking glass into a particular perspective that many white women’s rights leaders espoused, whether privately or publicly.

### **Cognitive Ableism and Elevating the Race: Black Women and the Future**

On July 21, 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) formed from the merger of the National Federation of Afro-American Women and the Colored

Women's League of Washington.<sup>165</sup> One of its primary missions was to improve its own people, and many of its leaders drew on the messages of black women from the past who had advocated for the emancipation of slaves, as well as the improvement of living conditions for newly freed slaves. While the NACW's resolutions included voting rights and protesting legal and social discrimination against their race, much of the discourse that black women produced involved improving the cognitive abilities of women so they could make choices for the future, make the right choices in the home and in the family, and provide choices for children in the future.<sup>166</sup>

Some scholars agree that the construction of womanhood embraced by the NACW perpetuated class discrimination within the movement. I would go a step further to argue that these classist constructions were really another version of the ableist CENs constructed and reinforced by white women's rights speakers.<sup>167</sup> Fulfilling the parameters of knowledge, intelligence, and morality set out by leaders in the movements was imperative to being included in the narrative, rather than being excluded from progress and advancement. Black women's rights discourses elevated those who were

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165. In 1896 Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Margaret Murray Washington, Fanny Jackson Coppin, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Charlotte Forten Grimké, and former slave Harriet Tubman met in Washington, D.C., to form the National Association of Colored Women (NACW).

166. Beverly W. Jones, "Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women 1896-1901" *Journal of Negro History* 67.1 (Spring, 1982): 20-33; This article provides an historical account of her time with the NACW. Part of this work articulated that the NACW, "provided social services to the community and worked for the betterment of the situation of women," as well as "for the betterment of the members of their race." Additionally, black historians, such as Angela Davis, Michele Mitchell, and Kevin Gaines have addressed the narrative of racial uplift and the connection of racial improvement to the improvement of intellect. Additionally, the work of women such as Mary Church Terrell, Fannie Barrier Williams, and other NACW leaders contained discourses that directly advocated for women's improvement via education.

167. Black historians Dorothy Roberts, Kevin Gaines, Michele Mitchell, Mark S. Giles, and Beverly T. Jones have addressed the elitism of the racial uplift narrative among black people in this time period, and the class divides it often constructed.

educated as the “knowers of right” and criticized those whose behaviors and life-styles were not in line with the mission of the women of the NACW. What it meant to be a “colored woman”, as they referred to themselves, at this moment in the black women’s clubs and organizations did not always include all colored women in its scope. Rather, it excluded any black woman who could not meet the requirements of able-bodied womanhood, motherhood, and citizenship set out by the leaders of the NACW.

### ***Mary Church Terrell and Fannie Barrier Williams in the White Public Sphere***

Leaders within the black women’s rights community spoke not only to women and men of their own race, but were often called upon to speak at white women’s events as “representatives” of their race. As the president of the NACW, Mary Church Terrell’s presence at the fifty-year anniversary of the NAWSA in 1898, was one that still begs to be questioned, however, as black women continued to be kept from membership in most white women’s organizations. Invited to deliver a speech to a group dominated by (if not completely comprised of) white, middle- and upper-class women, Terrell functioned here much the same way that Sojourner Truth did at the 1851 Women’s Convention in New York. What is important to remember is that members of the NAWSA were at that time debating an educational requirement for those claiming the right to vote. Many people of color had been denied education for the majority of their lives and had been considered cognitively inferior from the time they arrived on the continent, automatically precluding many women of color from the voting rights that the NAWSA was fighting for. Additionally, many women in the organization also believed that those who had been on state or federal aid and/or those who had been imprisoned should also be denied

the right to vote. Those freed slaves who had been imprisoned for racist reasons would also be ineligible to vote, regardless of their innocence or cognitive ability. Terrell's speech worked to articulate the "progress of colored women" in a white public space that continued to use CENs as a means of excluding black women's bodies from their rhetorics of citizenship.

Terrell delivered the *Progress of Colored Women*, a speech that exemplified much of the oratory work that she had used in the past and would use in the future.<sup>168</sup> But, there were portions of the speech that specifically addressed the debate within the white women's movement and the NAWSA. Speaking about people of color, Terrell pointed out that "the law of the States in which the majority lived made it a crime to teach them to read."<sup>169</sup> While this may have been a response to the NAWSA's limited suffrage debates, Terrell was illustrating the progress that colored women had made regardless of the hurdles they had to overcome. She began with education. Her focus on the *minds* of women of color throughout her speech reflected Maria Miller Stewart's argument sixty years earlier, and reinforced the cognitive ableist underpinnings of black women's rights discourses:

But from the day their fetters were broken and their minds released from the darkness of ignorance to which for more than two hundred years they had been doomed, from the day they could stand erect in the dignity of womanhood, no longer bond but free, till tonight, colored women have forged

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168. Mary Church Terrell, *Progress of Colored Women*, National American Women's Suffrage Association (Washington, DC: Smith Brothers Printers, 1898).

169. Terrell, *Progress* 7.

steadily ahead in the acquisition of knowledge and in the cultivation of those virtues which make for good.<sup>170</sup>

But Terrell connected freedom and dignity with the acquisition of knowledge and cultivation of virtues.<sup>171</sup> This type of argument not only advanced attitudes about people of color, but reinforced the ableist notion that anyone who was not educated or virtuous was undignified and “enslaved.” If this was true, then many people of color, as well as lower class individuals, were rightfully discriminated against because they did not embrace the ideals of cognitive achievement and adhere to prescriptions for autonomy.

Both black and white women’s groups had been working towards full citizenship, but in the process constructed cognitive disability as something to be abhorred, something that kept a person ignorant, immoral, and undignified, undesirable. Terrell’s work played a significant part in this construction and reinforcement of the dependent and disabled body as a “problem.” Her focus on the acquisition of knowledge as one of the great “progresses” of colored women confirmed Maria Miller Stewart’s charge sixty years earlier. But had Stewart’s prediction that prejudice would go away and that white people would agree that black people were deserving of freedom and independence also been fulfilled? No, because citizenship was being so closely linked with knowledge, dignity, and morality, by white and black activists. Many people of color were still considered “unserviceable” to the society because of their failure to achieve a level of cognitive ability that would allow them to claim the rights being argued for. Terrell

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170. Terrell, *Progress* 7-8.

171. Terrell constructed an argument that linked freedom with the dignity of womanhood, denying the dignity that Saidiya Hartman would argue one hundred years later was present in the slave experience, a dignity that came from moments of agency and assertions of power. See Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*.

admitted in her speech that the education of people of color had been denied, even made illegal, in many parts of the country. How then could she or any other woman, black or white, continue to base her argument on education as a marker of citizenship and value?

In her list of the “progresses of colored women,” Terrell went one step further in connecting knowledge to value, claiming, “colored girls have been graduated with honors, and have thus forever settled the question of their capacity and worth.”<sup>172</sup> While I understand that Terrell was constructing a counterargument in response to societal prejudices that had labeled women and people of color as cognitively inferior, her link of education and worth supported the notion that education and intelligence, or the lack thereof, would determine any body’s value to society and ability to be a productive and responsible citizen. Through her use of a CEN that claimed rights for black women, but also denied any woman whose cognitive abilities would not meet her standards, Terrell worked to reinforce her ideas regarding cognitive achievement appeared to be in line with those of white women who were promoting a limited suffrage.

In her speech, Terrell’s addressed education on multiple levels. Formal education, which she spoke of earlier, was only one part of the NACW’s mission to improve people of color. Domestic education was also considered a necessary undertaking for Terrell and the women of the NACW, particularly the education of those “from whom shackles have but yesterday fallen”:

Believing that it is only through the home that a people can become really good and truly great, the National Association of Colored Women has entered that sacred domain. Homes, more homes, better homes, purer

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172. Terrell, *Progress* 9.

homes is the text upon which our have been and will be preached. [I]f these women [NAWSA] feel the need of a Mothers' Congress that they may be enlightened as to the best methods of rearing children and conducting their homes, how much more do our women, from whom shackles have but yesterday fallen, need information on the same vital subjects?<sup>173</sup>

In a society that revered the traditional family and the cult of true womanhood, Terrell's comments were expected.<sup>174</sup> But, the invasion of that "sacred domain" by the women of the NACW must be questioned. Who decided what the "best methods" were for raising children? Hadn't most of the women in need of reform been raising children for centuries, even in slavery? Hadn't they, in fact, been raising the white children of white middle- and upper-class women? And, hadn't they also been performing all of the housekeeping duties for these very same women? What made the NACW believe that child rearing and housekeeping was deficient amongst particular groups of colored women? Assumptions about intellect and ability were based on a class division among black women, a class division that allowed Terrell and others to claim intellectual superiority and prescribe cognitive achievement as the means for racial progress.

Beverly W. Jones's work articulated Terrell's initiatives as first leader of the NACW, once of which was, "The creation of a cadre of elite women to head local affiliates." Jones explained, "Ideologically, Terrell's framework of leadership embraced the Talented Tenth philosophy of W.E.B. DuBois that the well-educated, when provided

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173. Terrell, *Progress* 10.

174. Black and white women's responses in their public speeches and essays often addressed and refuted men's assertions that women's rights would destroy the home and marriage.

with opportunities to develop their native capabilities, would rise and eventually carry the untalented along with it.”<sup>175</sup> Terrell’s argument paralleled Harriet Stanton Blatch’s argument in *The Journal*, three years earlier—that the weakest link must be identified and fixed, in order for the strong to move forward. This philosophy was never more evident than in Terrell’s work and the work of many other black rights leaders during this time period.<sup>176</sup> Organizers in the NACW consistently argued that it was their duty to improve the newly freed black women, cognitively and socially, so the entire race could be uplifted.

Jones also discusses the ideological formulations of the NACW and explained that the organization, under the leadership of Terrell, did not challenge the traditional roles of women; it worked to support the cult of true womanhood, because black women wanted to claim the same rights that white women were already claiming, in addition to claiming the right to vote. In order to do this, they had to improve the “untalented” black women so that they could be the best wives and mothers possible and thus improve the race. The women the NACW believed needed their aid and attention were the cognitively deficient, the “untalented ninety percent”:

Talks on social purity and the proper method of rearing children are made for the benefit of mothers, who in many instances fall short of their duty, not because they are vicious and depraved, but because they are ignorant and poor.<sup>177</sup>

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175. Beverly W. Jones, “Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women, 1896 to 1901” *The Journal of Negro History* 67.1 (1982): 20-33.

176. See Angela Davis, Michele Mitchell, Kevin Gaines, Dorothy Roberts, Mark J. Giles, and Beverly W. Jones’s historical accounts provide significant examples of racial uplift ideology among male and female black intellectuals.

177. Terrell, *Progress* 10.

Much like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Terrell married poverty and ignorance when discussing those in need of reform. While she may have argued that they were not “vicious or depraved,” she still relied on intellect as a marker of value. The “ignorant and poor” were falling short of their duty. Until they fulfilled their duty, the way the NACW wanted them to, they would remain ignorant and poor, not just poor. Unlike Mott, however, Terrell’s words here acknowledge that poverty can play a role in the quality of people’s lives and that ignorance can be attributed to poverty; however, her work four years later was not quite as tolerant of the ignorant and poor women she spoke of that day.

Terrell and women of the NACW were arguing for the progress that colored women had made, while other leaders of black women’s groups were frustrated with the labeling of black women and black homes as immoral, as evidenced in Fannie Barrier Williams’s 1893 speech at the World Columbian Exposition:

I regret the necessity of speaking to the question of the moral progress of our women because the morality of our home life has been commented on so disparagingly and meanly that we are placed in the unfortunate position of being defenders of our name [...] The slave code recognized only animal distinctions between the sexes and ruthlessly ignored those ordinary separations of the sexes that belong to the social state. It is a great wonder that two centuries of such demoralization did not work a complete extinction of all the moral instincts.<sup>178</sup>

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178. Fanny Barrier Williams, *The Present Status and Intellectual Progress of Colored Women* (Chicago, World Columbian Exposition, 1893). While Flexner and Fitzpatrick utilized this quote in order to demonstrate the frustration of colored women regarding their treatment and consistent need to be on the

Williams placed blame with the dominant white race that had instituted a slave system in the US, and argued that the morality of black women was not something that she should have to defend, given the fact that the behaviors claimed (sexual immorality, family dysfunction) as immoral were dominated and dictated by white men and women. Unfortunately for Williams, as part of her lament, she confirmed a belief in moral degradation among black peoples. By wondering if all moral instincts were extinct, Williams's address on the moral progress of black women could be read as an admission that morality was lacking among many black women.

In this time period, attacks on the home were seen as attacks on women. Williams knew this assumption had to be addressed, but regretted having to do so. But, who is the "we" that she refers to when she says, "we are placed in the unfortunate position of being defenders of our name [...]?" As a leader in black women's rights, Williams would likely have been referring to other women like her—educated, middle-class, respected, black women. It was a shame that they had to defend their own names because of the large number of women who were "morally degenerate" and ruined the reputation of black women entirely. The cognitive and physical ableism that provided the foundations for morality judgments about women, black or white, were at play in Williams's discussion of the "Intellectual Progress of Colored Women." In order to counter a CEN that eliminated black women from citizenship and rights arguments, Williams was enacting a CEN of her own that eliminated black women who could be considered morally degenerate, or psychologically disabled. Moral choices, among black women, were coupled with cognitive abilities; and the choices of black women who

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defensive, I believe this quote not only demonstrates their point, but the greater argument that Williams was making regarding the acceptable and unacceptable black woman.

would already be viewed as cognitively deficient would be morally suspect and susceptible to criticism. Women who did not fulfill the ideals of true womanhood, whether physically or intellectually, were the ones who allowed for all women to be judged, necessitating a defense of those women who were not immoral, ignorant, and degraded. Those women were the deficiencies referred to by Stanton Blatch and Terrell, and those weak links had to be reinforced and remediated in order for the whole to be successful.

***Terrell, Williams, and the NACW: Intellect and Morality in Black Public Spaces***

When black women were speaking in predominantly black public spaces to black women, and men, much of the rhetoric shifted from defending black women as a group to confronting intra-racial issues of cognitive and psychological deficiencies among the lower classes of their own race. In 1901, Terrell, who was still president of the NACW, articulated a much different perspective on poor and ignorant black women than the defense of colored women that she had presented to the NAWSA three years earlier. Terrell's 1901 report to the NACW from the Tuskegee Women's Group offers an earlier example of the shift Terrell made, and the possibility for a similar shift in the NACW:

In no way could we live up to such a sentiment [referring to the "Lifting as We Climb" motto] better than by coming into closer touch with the masses of our women [...] Even though we wish to shun them, and hold ourselves entirely aloof from them, we cannot escape the consequences of their acts. So, that, if the call of duty were disregarded altogether, policy and self preservation would demand that we do go down among the lowly, the

illiterate, and even the vicious to whom we are bound by the ties of race and sex, and put forth every possible effort to uplift and claim them.<sup>179</sup>

Terrell's classist sentiments, steeped in cognitive ableism, were perhaps at their most blatant in this report. Acknowledging the desire of intellectual black women to shun the masses of colored women, she also charged the women of the NACW with their duty to go among what she termed the "lowly, illiterate, and vicious." It was only three years prior that she had claimed, at a white women's convention, that poverty and ignorance were the culprits of lower classes, but that they were not vicious and depraved (see earlier section on Terrell and the NAWSA). Terrell's shift to align viciousness with illiteracy and lowliness reinforced her call for cognitive achievement as the solution to uplifting the lower classes. Without literacy, no body would be able to be lifted out of a lowly, vicious and depraved life. The disabled body was, once again, linked with depravity. But, at this point, there were no overt racial connections to the class divide, only clearly cognitively ableist arguments being utilized against women who were considered intellectually inferior.

Her *Twentieth Century Negro Literature* essay also acknowledged a "vigorous crusade" in the NACW against homes the organization felt were unacceptable, immoral, and destructive to children and the future of colored people:

Against the one room cabin we have inaugurated a vigorous crusade.

When families of eight or ten men, women and children are all huddled promiscuously together in a single apartment, a condition common among

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179. Mary Church Terrell, "Report to President, Officers, and Members of the NACWQ from Tuskegee Women's Club," September 15, 1901, Mary Church Terrell Papers. Container 23, Reel 17, Library of Congress.

our poor all over the land, there is little hope of inculcating morality and modesty.<sup>180</sup>

Her failure to address the economic foundations for the necessity of one-room living, and her connection of morality and the size of one's dwelling provided a less-nuanced argument against lower class black women than she had previously articulated. Just as Cady Stanton and other white women's rights advocates had shifted their rhetoric to make expediency arguments that would aid their cause, so, too, did Terrell shift her focus from aiding poor black women to chastising their circumstances and constructing arguments for expediency that would provide for the betterment of black society.

Terrell continued to lament the uneducated and violent in her race, but also to construct a separation between women like herself, who were educated and cultured, and women she would consider responsible for the racist attitudes of white people:

It is unfortunate, but it is true, that the dominant race in this country insists upon gauging the Negro's worth by his most illiterate and vicious representatives rather than by the more intelligent and worthy classes. Colored women of education and culture know that they cannot escape altogether the consequences of the acts of their most depraved sisters.<sup>181</sup>

Her words demonstrated an attitude that was unquestionably frustrated, but also classist, particularly because she constructed the educated and cultured colored woman in opposition to their depraved sisters.<sup>182</sup> Eleanor Flexner and Ellen Fitzpatrick addressed

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180. Mary Church Terrell, "What Role is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race?" in Dr. Daniel W. Culp, ed. *Twentieth Century Negro Twentieth Century Negro Literature or A Cyclopedia of Thought on the Vital Topics Relating to the American Negro by One Hundred of America's Greatest Negroes* (Naperville: J. L. Nichols and Company, 1902).172-176.

181. Terrell, "Role of Educated"

182. Ibid.

this common anxiety among educated and higher-classed black women as part of their historical discussion of black women's club work:

Under such circumstances [family separations, violence against black people] clubs assumed an importance and a content quite different from that found among the white women's groups, and less often related to earlier literary and educational societies than to such matters as care of the indigent, the sick and the aged, support of a church, or aid for a needy student. As the women gained in experience, as their horizons broadened and leadership developed, club programs became diversified to the point where, as one woman expressed it, they embodied "the organized anxiety of women who have become intelligent enough to realize their own low condition, and strong enough to initiate the forces of reform."<sup>183</sup>

That "woman" Flexner and Fitzpatrick refer to was Fannie Barrier Williams. Mary Church Terrell was not alone in her concerns and worries that her own class of black women was being brought down by their lower class counter-parts. Terrell's work does stand out, however, in its very obvious shift regarding her attitude towards lower class black women. Once the victim, they soon became vicious, lowly, and illiterate. And, their status as such would never earn them the privileges of citizenship without a level of cognitive achievement that would lift them up to the ranks of the deserving.

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183. Flexner and Fitzpatrick 178-9. In this passage from Flexner and Fitzpatrick, the authors quote Fannie Barrier Williams, "The Colored Woman and Her Part in Race Regeneration," in *A New Negro for a New Century* (Chicago, 1900): 384, but this exact quote is also found in Barrier Williams' "The Club Movement Among Colored Women" in *The Voice of the Negro* (March 1904): 101.

Fannie Barrier Williams's essay in *The Voice of the Negro*, titled "The Club Movement Among Colored Women," tackled the internal issues of the club movements, but also worked to reinforce the expectation of intelligence and reform among the leaders. Her complete quote from this piece was part of her admonition to black women's clubs not to be imitative of white women's groups. Her assertion was:

The club movement among colored women means something deeper than a mere imitation of the more favored class of white women, because it has *grown out of the organized anxiety of women who have only recently become intelligent enough to recognize their own social condition and strong enough to initiate and apply the forces of reform.* It is a movement that reaches down into the sub-social condition of an entire race and has become the responsibility and effort of a few competent in behalf of the many incompetent.<sup>184</sup>

Williams named intelligence as the defining factor for black women's groups. It is with intelligence that they were able to recognize their position in society and to work to do something about it. The cognitive achievements of a few were to be the salvation for all.

Williams's essay critiqued particular aspects of the NACW, such as the imitative nature of the organization to those white women's club groups that pretend to do work, but do not. She also warned against making the organization political and overrun by the typical "petty envies and jealousies" of women. But, her arguments continued to come back to the idea that intellect was the marker of success and growth for the organization,

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184. Fannie Barrier Williams, "The Club Movement Among Colored Women," *The Voice of the Negro* 1.3 (March 1904): 99-102. Library of Congress, Microfilm Collections. Italics mine to highlight the quote that Flexner and Fitzpatrick quoted.

and that the responsibility of the clubs was to spread the intellectual assimilation to all of those in need in order for the race to be viewed as worthy of full citizenship:

This is a grave responsibility because the Negro is learning that the things that our women are doing come first in the lessons of citizenship: that there will never be an unchallenged vote, a respected political power, or an unquestioned claim to position of influence and importance, until the present stigma is removed from the home and the women of its race.<sup>185</sup>

Rather than supporting the lower classes of women, as Terrell had done earlier, many NACW leaders moved towards a message of reform and intellectual assimilation that would be necessary in order for the stigma to be removed. In a previous speech at the World's Fair in Chicago, Williams lamented the fact that she had to continue to fight against the stigmas associated with her own people, but she, too, was part of condemning the stigma and declaring the necessity of its eradication. Without intellectual assimilation, almost every action among black men and women would be questioned and challenged. Intellect was once again the marker of a valued body. Anxiety and frustration may have been at the heart of Terrell, Williams, and the NACW's work, but the underlying cognitive ableism that these women relied on supported a class division among black women that would continue to reinforce ideologies of value and worth based in intellect, morality, and independence.

While Williams took a strong position against black women's work being imitative of white women, after all, the social condition of each group of women was completely different, even though they were all women. The work would still require

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185. Williams, "Club Movement" 102.

intelligence in order to be accomplished and the anxieties of those that had achieved cognitively was causing psychological distress because of the responsibility they felt they should bear for their entire race of women. Just as Terrell had already done and continued to do, Williams focused on intellect as the marker of achievement for black club women, but she also made it clear that this intellectual assimilation also brought with it the burden of intellectually “fixing” the rest of the race. Without doing so, the cognitively incompetent could never achieve autonomy and be responsible citizens. They would remain intellectually and socially disabled because of their failure to become cognitively able-bodied.

Williams had already established what the success of the NACW would depend on. “To live up to its ideals, the clubs, of the Association need at all times the best intelligence of our women. Every woman who can contribute anything of helpfulness should find hospitable welcome in the clubs of the Association.”<sup>186</sup> Williams had also paralleled integrity with intelligence earlier in the article when she named those young women who would give integrity to the organization: “young women fresh from college, the cultured woman in the home, the efficient woman in business, the colored teacher, and the women who are working for the protection of our young women from the dangers of city life.”<sup>187</sup> If the NACW relied on intelligence in order to retain its integrity, then only those women who had achieved a level of cognitive achievement, as defined by Terrell, Williams, and other leaders, would be viewed as women worthy of the vote and other rights that black women were concerned with. This would leave out the majority of

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186. Williams, “Club Movement” 100.

187. Williams, “Club Movement” 100.

black women during this time, as they were neither of the women that Williams listed above, who would help to build the integrity of the organization.

### **Intersections of Cognitively Ableist Rhetorical Tropes in Black and White Women's**

#### **Rights:**

In the latter part of the nineteenth century in the US, black and white women who were active in women's rights organizations and social clubs had at least one common premise around which they rallied—the improvement of the race or nation was in the hands of women, thus women needed to improve themselves. Much of the focus on women's improvement revolved around their physical and cognitive abilities and the need for all women to meet prescribed set of standards that included reading, writing, child-rearing, and social and governmental awareness.

Many white women argued for cognitive achievement in order to cloak underlying physically ableist sentiments and discrimination against groups they felt were physically and morally inferior. Black women argued for cognitive achievement as a means of bringing their own people out of the ruins of slavery. The CENs created by these arguments furthered the disability rhetoric of early women's rights rhetors and fortified the belief that one had to be able-bodied in order to claim citizenship rights.

Whether clubs and organizations were predominantly peopled with white or black women, the overarching message among middle- and upper-class women (1890-1905) demonstrated a concern with the physical and cognitive improvement of women as the first step to improving society. Discourses of ideal woman/motherhood, promoting a corporeally exclusionary narrative (CEN), promised the improvement of women's and

children's lives if they could achieve the standards set up in the narrative; however, they also served to marginalize many of the women who were perceived as in need of reform. The arguments for improvement demonstrated an underlying belief in the "ideal woman/mother" and advocated for assimilating to this ideal.

While arguments that involved calls for intellectual assimilation extend well into the twenty-first century, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century discourses within the dominant women's movements, black or white, continued to rely on qualifications for citizenship and rights based in physical, intellectual and/or moral capacity or fitness. The connection of race, class, and disability to dependency allowed for these bodies to be claimed inferior, deemed intellectually and morally unfit to hold the vote, and reinforced the corporeal exclusions originally utilized by men in order to claim citizenship rights.

While the arguments in the late nineteenth century may not have overtly labeled bodies as disabled, the educational and moral qualifications that were proposed by women, black and white, came out of a dependency discourse that relied on the abject status of these particular bodies in order to stake its claims for the rights of white and/or black, educated, middle-class, moral, able-bodied women. It continued to perpetuate the relationship between intellect and morality, constructing an additional CEN that disqualified women who were not only cognitively disabled, but would be assumed to be psychologically (morally) disabled as the result of their intellectual deficiencies. Additionally, their work also linked dependency and degeneracy, constructing and reinforcing a disability rhetoric that demanded a cognitive ability standard that served as the very foundation for the corporeal exclusions at work in the discourses surrounding woman's rights and reform arguments in the 1890s and beyond. Those bodies left behind

would be denied access to the rights that others had either been granted because of their race or class, and/or their physical and intellectual achievements. At the end of the nineteenth century, discourses among women's rights advocates would begin to revolve around those bodies deserving not only of voting rights, but reproductive rights, as well as those bodies that would need disciplined in order to be allowed to make their own reproductive choices.

## **Chapter Four: Eugenics and Ableism – Constructing Motherhood**

In the earliest part of the twentieth century, women's rights discourses expanded to address reproductive rights and the mother's role as a responsible and intelligent citizen. Focusing on motherhood as the primary role of woman, rights advocates fought for a woman's freedom to make decisions regarding reproduction and the raising of children. Whether arguing for full access to reproductive information and treatment in order to better society or arguing for mandatory reproductive control for specific groups of women, supporters of women's rights focused on the future—the future generations of America.

It was not politically expedient to claim reproductive rights for all women as a natural right, but the burgeoning eugenics movement allowed for a socially acceptable argument for reproductive choices, particularly birth control, for some groups of women. One concern of opponents of reproductive freedom was that women would opt not to have children if given the freedom to choose, a growing population being necessary for the growth of the country. Rather than argue for reproductive care/choices for all women, women's rights advocates engaged a more politically expedient message, steeped in eugenic philosophy, in order to gain access to birth control: birth control could be used as a means of culling the less desirable parts of US society.

While many of these discourses were not directly about birth control, the concern with heredity and controlling the production of inferior offspring were the underlying eugenic arguments presented. Some women's rights rhetors infused their arguments with eugenic philosophy, relying on "fitness" as a marker of value and supported a corporeally

exclusionary narrative that was justified entirely by the need to improve and better society. As historian and feminist scholar Linda Gordon explains:

Using hereditarian arguments, they were still in the perfectionist vein of American reformism. Eugenics helped them integrate their grievances into a unified program for reform; if vice was itself hereditary, once abolished it would be gone forever.<sup>188</sup>

For this reason, many of these discourses were able to utilize the same expediency arguments and ableist rhetoric that had already been utilized among those calling for cognitively ableist standards of achievement as a measure of progress and success. And, as a result, the corporeally exclusionary narrative (CEN) based on cognitive ability that had been utilized to argue for limited suffrage and the discrimination against lower classes continued to infuse itself into the reproductive rights and feminist eugenic philosophies of the women's rights movements.

This chapter covers a time period between 1902 and 1932, when disability rhetoric was used to support a eugenic discourse among women's rights advocates focused on reproductive freedom. Dominant voices in white and black women's fights for reproductive control and independence capitalized on the already established CENs of womanhood and motherhood, and relied both on positive (more superior babies) and negative (less inferior babies) eugenic philosophies in order to establish the different duties of women regarding their access to reproduction and reproductive tools. Some scholars claim that birth control advocates were using *either* positive or negative eugenic arguments, but I argue that even a positive eugenics approach relied on a belief in

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188. L. Gordon, *Woman's Body Woman's Right: Birth Control in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990): 119.

negative eugenics and the eradication of the “unfit.” The dominant CENs rely on multiple ableist discourses, utilizing physical, cognitive, and psychological ability as markers of fitness. Whether eugenic arguments were made against a particular race, ethnicity, and/or class, the elimination of the unfit was about the elimination of disability and disabled peoples. Programs and events such as “Better Babies Contests” helped women reinforce the CEN that women were being asked to reinforce via their choices as mothers. Expediency rhetoric allowed women to proclaim the eradication of the disabled necessary for the betterment of US society.<sup>189</sup> Each of the authors I present in this chapter engaged multiple parameters of ability in order to construct their disability-centered eugenic philosophies.

This chapter argues that early-twentieth-century women’s rights advocates relied on cognitively ableist ideologies in support of the corporeally exclusionary narrative of the “ideal mother,” which furthered their own agendas regarding family planning, birth control, and social improvement. Utilizing arguments of physical, cognitive, and psychological disability to categorize women and their resultant children as unfit, women’s rights advocates argued for more access to reproductive rights for some women, while denying access to reproductive freedom for others. According to the majority of these arguments, it was the woman’s responsibility to make good choices: choose a “fit” (able-bodied) husband, produce “fit” (able-bodied) children, and raise responsible (able-bodied) citizens who would also embrace the physical, cognitive, and psychological

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189. While I acknowledge that this whole discourse is shrouded in exclusionary maternalist rhetoric, which already discounted single mothers and those women who did not have children, my focus is on the disability rhetoric within eugenic discourses that required women, as mothers, to be the source of social improvement. Maternalist rhetoric was strong among women fighting not only for the right to control the timing of their pregnancies, but also the right to choose not to reproduce at all. Advocates wanted access to methods of birth control, access to clinics for reproductive care, and access to services that would aid women in caring for their living children.

ableism at the heart of the corporeally exclusionary narrative of citizenship that was being preached by women's rights advocates.

### **Thoroughbreds and Supermen: White Women's Eugenic Reproductive Discourses**

Many white female proponents for access to birth control and reproductive freedom were denying reproductive freedom to other women based on ableist ideals of race, class, and disability. Embracing a eugenic philosophy, in order to support their own arguments for race improvement, many white women's rights advocates focused on the "inferior stock," and that inferior stock was often categorized based on cognitive and psychological ability and/or disability. White women, like Margaret Sanger, recognized that demanding birth control for all women as a natural right was not going to achieve the goals of reproductive rights advocates. Expediency arguments were enacted in order to claim birth control as a means for bettering society. It was this shift towards the use of corporeally exclusionary narratives that would accomplish the goals of white middle class birth control advocates.

### ***Eliminating the Defectives and Degenerates: Charlotte Perkins Gilman***

As a proponent of birth control, Charlotte Perkins Gilman questioned, "Perhaps since birth is woman's business it is right that she have some voice in discussing its control."<sup>190</sup> Like many reformers that came before and after her, Gilman espoused a maternal argument that appeared to be concerned with women's rights to make choices regarding childbirth and reproduction. But, her call for birth control and what she

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190. C. Gilman, "Progress Through Birth Control," *The North American Review* (December 1927): 627.

considered the “progress” that came from it were just as often steeped in race, class, ethnicity, and ability biases that targeted particular female populations as the cause of social degeneration. They were arguments that became more about population control than birth control and family planning.

*Concerning Children*, first published in 1900 and reprinted in 1901, began with a chapter entitled, “The Precious Ten.” In this chapter, Gilman relied on the “natural conviction” of man that he was of the first class of God’s creations. But, she clarified, “Whatever our merits when compared with lower species, however, we vary conspicuously when compared with one another. Humanity is superior to equinity, felinity, caninity; but there are degrees of humanness.”<sup>191</sup> Gilman’s premise for race improvement relied on a physically and cognitively ableist informed perspective that the human race was still “in the making, is by no means done,” and that children were the piece of humanity that could be targeted for “fixing.” The degrees of humanness that she referred to were the differences between races, especially those that were deemed advanced and progressed as opposed to those that she classified as uncivilized and barbaric. While her degrees of humanity were overtly driven by race, this particular expression of racism was based on an ableist philosophy that claimed bodies of those from other races were disabled, physically, intellectually, and psychologically (morally).

Gilman claimed that, “As conscious beings, able to modify our own acts, we have power to improve the species, to promote the development of the human race.”<sup>192</sup> Her

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191. C. Perkins Gilman, *Concerning Children* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1900): 3.

192. Gilman *Concerning* 3.

belief in the possibility of improvement, relied on her belief in degrees of humanness.<sup>193</sup> Could her “conscious being” who was able to “improve the species” through acts and choices be anyone but an able-bodied, white, middle- or upper- class man or woman? Gilman held firm that race improvement had to be made before an adolescent gave birth so it could be passed to the next generation. “The real progress of man is born in him.”<sup>194</sup> While an individual might improve him/herself over time, the race itself could not be improved without targeting young children and enacting improvement tactics upon them, educating them, civilizing them, training them to be better citizens, citizens who would not drain society. Improving this generation of children would have an impact on the next generation produced. According to Gilman, “education can do much; but the body and brain the child is born with are all that you have to educate.”<sup>195</sup> Man’s progress was born within. An individual, with his/her personal improvements, could not be demonstrative of racial improvement. A race would remain disabled and low on the ladder of humanity, if entire generations of children were not cognitively improved. For Gilman, it was the disabled masses, saved by modern science and humanitarianism, which had become an impediment to the progress of society:

We see plenty of such cases, individually, showing this arrested social development, from the eighteenth-century man, who is only a little behind his age and does not hinder us much, to the dragging masses of dull peasantry and crude savagery, which keep us back too seriously. This

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193. Gilman, *Concerning* 4.

194. Gilman, *Concerning* 3.

195. *Ibid.*

does not include the reversions and degenerates, the absolutely abortive members of society.<sup>196</sup>

Her belief that this generally dull (cognitively disabled) and crude group of peoples could be provided with education, but that “we have still the slow-minded mass, whose limited range of faculties acts as a steady check on the success of our best intellects”<sup>197</sup> was shared by other ableist proponents of family planning like Margaret Sanger. It was also shared by eugenicists who would not support the rights of women to make their own choices, but would support the right of the state to control the growth of inferior/disabled stock from particular races or classes.

Seven years later (1908), Gilman published her “A Suggestion on the Negro Problem” in the *American Journal of Sociology*.<sup>198</sup> Gilman’s lackluster attempt (if it can even be called that) to cast blame upon white citizens of the US for their extradition of the Negro race to our country fell short of a true critique of the problem of slavery, and served more as a reinforcement of beliefs that the Negro race was physically, cognitively, and psychologically (morally) inferior to the white race. Particularly, Gilman referred to the Negro population as “the Negro problem” and the problem in her article was the lack of progress of the Negro race, as it compared with the white race, in terms of being “self-supporting and well behaved.”<sup>199</sup>

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196. Gilman, *Concerning* 5-6.

197. Gilman, *Concerning* 6.

198. C. Perkins Gilman, “A Suggestion on the Negro Problem,” *American Journal of Sociology* 14.1 (July 1908): 78-85.

199. Gilman, “Suggestion” 80.

For Gilman, those Negroes who could not support themselves, because of physical, cognitive, or psychological disability were unworthy of rights or advocacy on their behalf. According to her rationale, only those who were physically able-bodied and able to work and/or those who were cognitively and psychologically able-bodied enough to make good decisions regarding their own behavior should be worthy of rights or advocacy. Once again, rather than acknowledge the same social and economic systems that had failed her as a woman, Gilman's ableist premise blamed a people who had long been denied not only personhood, but education and dignity, for their failure to achieve the same level of able-bodied progress as those able-bodied white middle- and lower-class people who had kept them subjected. Gilman only valued bodies that didn't need saving via science and technology, those perfectly able-bodied members of society who deserved rights because of their ability to physically, cognitively, and psychologically fulfill their duties to society.

According to Gilman, in order for the Negro population to be a part of society, it had to be a valuable part of society. She utilized a body metaphor in order to explain the role that the Negro population might play in US society:

The problem—the question of conduct—the pressing practical issue—is, What can we do to promote the development of the backward race so that it may become an advantageous element in the community? This is not a question of “equality” in any sense. Society is an organic relation, it is not composed of constituents all alike and equally developed but most diverse and unequal. It is quite possible to have in a society members far inferior to other members, but yet essential to the life of the whole. A man would

rather lose all his ten toes than his two eyes; and both feet than his eyes and ears. Our special senses are far “superior” to our meat and bones; yet it is quite essential to the body’s life that even its least important parts be healthy.<sup>200</sup>

Perhaps more straight and to the point, was Gilman’s following declaration:

He is here; we can’t get rid of him; it is all our fault; he does not suit us as he is; what can we do to improve him?<sup>201</sup>

Gilman’s attempt to explain the inequality of society was one that started strong with an acknowledgement that not all constituents were alike, nor were they equally developed. The fact that they were “most diverse and unequal” was something Gilman stated as matter of fact. Certain members of society could be far inferior to others—because of their perceived physical, cognitive, and psychological disabilities—and still be essential to the existence of the society. There must always be those members of society that performed labor, served the wealthy, slaved and toiled for their bosses, and cared for the homes and children of the middle and upper class white women, who either did not have the time or inclination to do so. Part of the irony in Gilman’s work lay in the fact that she (and other middle-class white women) claimed motherhood as a moral responsibility, but often allowed those “morally inferior” women to care for their white middle-class children.

But, where did these inferiorities lie? Gilman’s previous work had claimed physical and cognitive deficiencies as the basis for exclusion. But, in this essay, it

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200. Gilman, “Suggestion” 79-80.

201. Gilman, “Suggestion” 80.

certainly was not in physical disability, as laborers needed a healthy body in order to perform service and be “useful.” The ableism in this piece of Gilman’s work was primarily an ableism that targeted the cognitively and psychologically disabled body. This type of body was not redeemable, unless it was truly reformed or improved. According to Gilman’s rationale above, Negroes were toes and feet (physically able-bodied) and as superior beings the white middle and upper class were eyes and ears (cognitively and psychologically able-bodied). White people’s “superior” cognitive abilities (senses) were much more important. Following her metaphor, I must question why eyes and ears would be more important than feet in regards to mobility. Was it because the eyes and ears had so long been associated with knowledge acquisition and education, and, according to Gilman, the feet would not have been important for the gathering of information? Gilman’s words assumed, as many other philosophers and theorists in the past had, that knowledge did not come from physical experience, that it came from the visual, the auditory, and those things associated with the brain, our superior organ.<sup>202</sup> This type of ableism supported the mind-body separation philosophy, and demonstrated a cognitive ableism that valued bodies who could “think” over bodies that could “do.” According to Gilman, we needed the bodies that “do,” in order to keep society running, but the bodies that “thought” were the valuable members of society that would be considered on the highest level of humanity. Humanity, then, was determined by cognitive and psychological ability. Her goal was to improve Negroes cognitively and

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202. Philosophers like Descartes have often privileged mind over body. Our modern society still privileges sight as the medium for acquiring knowledge. Consider the work of Edward Tufte in the data visualization field. His belief that “forever knowledge” comes from vision and seeing, and fails to account for the accumulation of knowledge for those with visual impairments. F. Lichtman, “Edward Tufte Wants You to See Better,” Interview with Edward Tufte. NPR Science Friday, 18 January 2013. Web. 1 January 2016.

psychologically, particularly in regards to being responsible financially, hard-working, and industrious. The irony was that the lack of education among Negro people had been perpetrated by the middle and upper-class white society that enslaved them, keeping them ignorant and uneducated as a means of keeping them subjected. The racial prejudice illustrated in the corporeally exclusionary narrative that painted the bodies of Negroes as inferior/lacking supported a cognitive and psychological ableism articulated in Gilman's diagnosis of the "problem." This CEN was not unfamiliar to white and black women involved in women's rights movements.

For white women's rights advocates of the past, and for Gilman, cognitive ability was a determiner of morality, which meant that a person's morality, which was steeped in psychological ableism, was determined by his cognitive ability. The cognitively abled would then also be moral, while the cognitively disabled would be seen as immoral because of their irrational and psychologically disabled decision-making. If a person was in their right mind, they would act morally and make the decisions expected of them by the white middle class who set the standards of morality. Without the cognitive ability to make moral decisions, a body could then be deemed psychologically disabled, as well.<sup>203</sup> The able-bodied woman (independent, autonomous, educated, and moral) was most desirable as a tool for race improvement, regardless of the race or ethnicity. Failing to fulfill these requirements not only made white women ineligible for the rights that many middle- and upper-class, white women claimed for themselves, but also worked to deny an entire race the possibility of "suing as is." Without the reformation that Gilman and

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203. This is evident in the psychological disorders attached to gay men and lesbians, as well as sexually active women who were deemed psychologically unwell because of their choices.

other white women's rights leaders were promoting, the problem of the Negro, classified in terms of cognitive and psychological disability, would never be solved.

Gilman attached the value of a body to its cognitive ability to be a productive citizen. Improving the mind would improve future generations of the race, whether black or white. White women's rights advocates, like Gilman, were targeting cognitive ability as the center of the problem in need of fixing. Without adequate cognitive ability a person could not be trusted to make moral decisions. Re-training and re-educating was one tactic that could be used in order to establish a cognitive fitness among those of the lower classes, improving both races and supporting a betterment of American society in the process. But, it could and would also be used to construct particular groups of women as cognitively inferior, and less worthy of reproducing, at all.

Gilman's work has led some scholars to view her as, primarily, a positive eugenicist (promotion of "superior" births) whose rhetoric was supported by an expediency argument—a superior mother would produce superior offspring. After all, the production of superior babies was at the forefront of her agenda. Her argument that the "emancipation of women would make women physically and mentally stronger and thus more capable of producing eugenically fit offspring to regenerate the race" comfortably fit into the already existing expediency arguments for women's rights and their individual rights for birth control and reproductive freedom. It was for the betterment of society.

Disability studies scholars, Sharon Lamp and W. Carol Cleigh, interrogate the work of both Gilman and Margaret Sanger, identifying their "feminist rhetorics of

disability” in the age of eugenics.<sup>204</sup> While I would agree with much of what they have written, I do not agree that Gilman’s work was primarily a work of positive eugenics. She did not just want white middle class women to have more, better babies, she wanted to eliminate the babies of those she considered unfit. According to Lamp and Cleigh, Gilman’s work tread a common path with Margaret Sanger’s negative eugenics when she linked women’s liberation and a defective free society – claiming that women were responsible to eliminate the inferior bodies via reproductive choices.<sup>205</sup> Lamp and Cleigh claimed one of the differences between Gilman and Sanger was in their flexible use of eugenic labeling of the unfit. “Gilman’s eugenic attention was directed primarily towards people labeled defective and feeble-minded, while Sanger expanded the class of eugenically unfit to include the poor.”<sup>206</sup> Their work has not accurately addressed the fact that Gilman also targeted the poor in her work and that Sanger’s *Birth Control Review* was riddled with articles about defectives—physical and psychological; however, I find Lamp and Cleigh’s work significant in demonstrating that expediency logic created complex and multi-layered possibilities for meaning in these types of eugenic arguments. Both Gilman and Sanger’s expediency arguments allowed for a flexible interpretation of what was “better” or what would “make things better.” And, this type of flexibility continued to allow for a broader and broader interpretation of what could be labeled as “unfit.” In claiming cognitive and psychological ability as markers of “fitness,” the label of “unfit” could be applied to black women who had been denied education, immigrant

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204. S. Lamp and W. Carol Cleigh, “A Heritage of Ableist Rhetoric in American Feminism from the Eugenics Period,” in K. Q. Hall, ed, *Feminist Disability Studies* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2011): 175-190.

205. Lamp and Cleigh 176.

206. Ibid.

women who did not speak English and had been denied education, and the poor in all races who could be classified as lacking in morality and judgment (cognitive disability layered with psychological disability). The flexibility of “better” was a fortuitous outcome of expediency arguments for eugenic feminists who used these to construct CENs that would better our society; one elimination (defective) at a time. As a result, the corporeally exclusionary narratives already established by Cady Stanton, Mott, the NAWSA, and many other white women’s rights advocates could be expanded or contracted to fit whichever bodies were deemed unworthy of reproductive freedom and voluntary access to birth control.

Almost twenty years later in her 1927 “Progress Through Birth Control,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman articulated her dissatisfaction with the progress in science and humanitarianism:

Modern science and humanitarianism are changing all that. We are taking every means to preserve the most undesirable stock. Those who are able to earn are taxed to support those who are not. The best is handicapped by the worst, and this increasingly so as we learn new ways of keeping incompetents alive.<sup>207</sup>

Gilman’s distaste for the changes taking place at the beginning of the twentieth century with advances in science, medicine, and humanity revolved around what she considered “undesirable stock.” These advances made it possible to save the lives and bodies of many who would have previously died from disease, accidental injury, or war.<sup>208</sup> But, as

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207. Gilman, “Progress Through Birth Control,” *The North American Review* (December 1927): 622-629.

Gilman and many other eugenic feminists lamented, they also allowed weak and inferior bodies to continue to reproduce rather than being eliminated from society in a natural, Darwinian manner. Keeping incompetents alive handicapped all of society, as those who were unable to produce or earn could not be taxed and would therefore have to be supported by those who could.

For Gilman, modern science and humanitarianism was a problem. Modern science saved lives, even the lives of the least worthy. Modern science could save a weak child, patch up a seriously wounded soldier, and prolong the life of an aging grandmother.

While Gilman's quote above did not refer directly to these specific bodies, it was likely that she would have viewed any unproductive body saved by modern science or humanitarian efforts as handicapping others, draining the resources of society. For Gilman, an unproductive body was one that could not work and support itself.<sup>209</sup>

Keeping incompetents alive was a problem for her, one that needed to be solved, either through drastic methods like sterilization, or through more covert operations like "family planning" and/or "birth control."<sup>210</sup>

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208. Advances in knowledge regarding nutrition, sanitation, and hygiene are credited for much of the prevention of disease in the early twentieth century. Medical advances, such as the isolation of adrenaline (1901), the first effective cure for syphilis (1909), the identification of vitamins (1912), the isolation of heparin (1916), and the invention of the endotracheal tube (1917), must also account for the prevention of death not only from accidental injury, but also war. Accounts of major scientific and medical advances can be found on numerous medical history, military medical history, and scientific history sites such as [Perfline.com](http://Perfline.com), [Planetseed.com](http://Planetseed.com), and [nlm.nih.gov](http://nlm.nih.gov).

209. Lamp and Cleigh 176.

210. Ten years before Charlotte Perkins Gilman would use the same rationale to further her argument for population control in "Progress Through Birth Control," Margaret Sanger pointed out that our race had become sympathetic and tender towards the "weak." In the December 1917 issue, Sanger's "Birth Control and Woman's Health," The reader can infer that Sanger's discussion of the sympathy and pity was a critical one: In the early history of the race, so-called "natural law" reigned undisturbed. Under pitiless and unsympathetic iron rule, only the strong and most courageous could live and become progenitors of the race. The weak died early, or were killed. "What we need to do, is to combine Reason with a higher sense of sympathy, and to encourage the birth of those only whose inheritance is health, and only so as can be brought up in cleanliness and happiness. Sanger does not deny that sympathy is necessary, in fact, she argues for a "higher sense of sympathy" combined with Reason. Was her sympathy for those diseased and

Following social researcher and reformist Charles Booth's work on the working class in London, Gilman claimed that modern economic conditions had taken their toll on the influx of laborers from other countries. "The first, he [Booth] says, are reasonably well grown and healthy; the second generation smaller, weaker, more sickly; the third feeble, stunted, defective, degenerate; and there is no fourth!"<sup>211</sup> Gilman's words expressed her discomfort with the preservation of the people who were physically, cognitively, and psychologically unfit, which, based on her previous work, may have been referring to the "Negro," the ethnic, the poor, or the disabled—in short, any body that could not earn and be taxed. But, her argument utilized words like "health," "sickly," and "feeble, stunted, defective, degenerate," which focus on able-bodiedness as a marker of value and on disability as an undesirable and unredeemable quality; in fact, Gilman's argument claimed that by the fourth generation of foreign laborers, they would cease to exist. This, according to Gilman, was more desirable than the scientific and technological advances that would keep these disabled and inferior bodies alive. Rather than addressing the social and economic conditions that were working to keep the cycle of "degeneration" at work, Gilman blamed modern science and humanitarianism for the existent "incompetents" of the laboring peoples—the fourth generation that should simply not have existed.

Gilman's discomfort with modern science's ability to change this dynamic should not be surprising, as her eugenic feminist work began much earlier than 1927. Both *Concerning Children* (1900), as well as her "Suggestion on the Negro Problem" (1908)

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defective and the lives that they must lead? Or was it sympathy for our society that should not have to deal with those whose "inheritance" is not health?

211. Gilman, "Progress" 627.

articulated her earlier eugenics-driven, ability-based arguments not only for birth control, but also for selective breeding (through the selection of a mate). Often steeped in ableist ideologies of fitness, Gilman's work used disability in order to race and class bodies to constitute an "unfit" population as a target for "family planning" and/or "birth control," arguing for what many scholars now acknowledge was population control.

***Ableist Reproductive Freedom: Margaret Sanger and Early Birth Control Review***

*Motherhood, when free to choose the father, free to choose the time and number of children who shall result from the union, automatically works in wondrous ways. It refuses to bring forth weaklings, it refuses to bring forth slaves...it withholds the unfit, brings forth the fit.*

Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the Nation*, 1920

As late as the 1960s, Margaret Sanger was still an advocate for birth control and family planning, but her advocacy has been called into question because of its racist and classist undertones and methods.<sup>212</sup> Celebrated and vilified, Margaret Sanger's life and work have been discussed by numerous historians and scholars, non-feminist and feminist, alike. Her tireless activism for birth control and family planning and the founding of Planned Parenthood clinics are those parts of Sanger's legacy that are celebrated. But, her transition from feminist work as a champion for poor women's health and reproductive rights to a Malthusian influenced birth control platform that targeted poor women (particularly immigrants and black women) as objects of population control rather than a personal choice was, and is, still critiqued and debated.

As Sanger has been frequently written about and discussed in feminist circles, this chapter focuses particularly on her work in the first year of *The Birth Control Review*

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212. See Roberts, Davis, and L. Gordon.

(*BCR*) in order to discuss her role in producing a eugenic feminism reliant on disability rhetoric, not only as an author, but also as an editor, selecting essays, editorials, commentaries, and letters for publication. In so doing, Sanger furthered her own agenda while supporting and aiding in the embrace of eugenic philosophy within feminist circles fighting for birth control and family planning as a woman's right.

In its early years, the *BCR* was filled with articles espousing the cognitive and physical ableism that underlay the CENs of population control eugenics of this time period, and paired negative eugenics with positive eugenics, as a popular tactic in much of this work. These early issues illustrate Sanger's fostering of the work of like-minded women's rights advocates (male and female, black and white) who argued for birth control and family planning. Most of these selections were written by women, but Sanger also chose to include a number of articles by men, particularly men involved in the Malthusian influenced efforts in England and the US.<sup>213</sup>

The first edition of the *BCR* arrived in February 1917 with the slogan, "Dedicated to Intelligent and Voluntary Motherhood." As the editor and leader of this project, Sanger undoubtedly would have had a hand in choosing the slogan for the journal. As a proponent of voluntary motherhood, Sanger's use of this terminology would be understandable, but the addition of "intelligent" to the slogan must be acknowledged. Reform efforts among white and black women had been promoting education as the key to women's improved status and for the improvement of society. Education and

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213. Malthusian Theory, which articulated the supposition that while populations double over time, the resources available to support them do not increase identically on an exponential level. Therefore, limiting the population was necessary in order for survival. Darwin used Malthus's work in order to generate his own "Survival of the Fittest" theory, and others used Malthus's work to support eugenics and other theories revolving around population control.

motherhood had been linked to argue for women's rights, as educated mother was the key to improvement in society. But, the slogan does not say "Dedicated to *Educated* and Voluntary Motherhood," which could have been effective in promoting women's education. Instead, the use of intelligence as a marker of acceptable motherhood supported a cognitively ableist CEN that continued to be used in women's rights movements.

The "ideal motherhood" CEN excluded any woman who was not physically, cognitively, and psychologically fit to follow the prescriptions for motherhood and citizenship. Sanger advocated not just voluntary motherhood, which aided her fight for all women, but an intelligent motherhood, suggesting that those who were cognitively unfit should not be mothers and that birth control could help solve that problem. Rather than promoting voluntary use of birth control to raise the quality of life for women, Sanger and those she published in the *BCR* promoted a CEN that prescribed not voluntary, but mandatory, use of birth control for the very same women whose lives were in need of medical and financial improvement. Reproductive freedom would be the cover story for a restricted motherhood, based on a woman's able-bodiedness.

From the first issue, Sanger established unwanted pregnancy as a disease. Her opening letter, co-authored with Frederick A. Blossom and Elizabeth Stuyvesant, referred to birth control as the most vital issue before the country at that moment (1917), and stated that children should "come when they are desired, and not as helpless victims of blind chance."<sup>214</sup> This letter, put in context with other essays and opinion pieces that were published over the following years, connected unwanted pregnancy to disability and

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214. While part of her overall disability rhetoric, her use of blindness as a disability metaphor will not be addressed here, in order to focus on the greater disability message in her work.

disease, either for the mother, the child, or both. Evidence of this can be seen from the magazine's inception, and in Sanger's later work (not in the *BCR*) quoted in the beginning of this section. Unwanted pregnancies resulted in unfit offspring and problems for society. Birth control was necessary to control the number of disabled and unfit offspring that society would be responsible for.

Sanger's first solo essay in the *BCR* "Shall We Break This Law?" equated unwanted pregnancy with "disease," claiming if any other "disease" were afflicting women, our society (white, middle- and upper-class able-bodied men) would do something about it:

And yet the men of this land are today shielding and fostering just such a disease—a disease which sends mothers to an early grave, condemns wives to ill-health and invalidism, causes children to be born feeble in mind and body and crushes strong men under the weight of a burden they never asked to carry; a disease which eats into the very vitals of family life, tearing husband and wife asunder, crowding the divorce courts, depriving children of a mother's care and robbing maternity of its keenest joys; a disease which brings in its wake poverty, unemployment, child labor, prostitution, war; a disease sprung from ignorance of the means of preventing conception, an ignorance enforced by a law so vicious, so arrogant, so inhuman that thousands of earnest men and women are today asking themselves: "Shall we obey this law?"<sup>215</sup>

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215. M. Sanger, "Shall We Obey This Law?" *The Birth Control Review* (February 1917): 4.

But she never named the disease. Her readers were left to understand that “a disease sprung from ignorance of the means of preventing conception,” was unwanted pregnancy. This piece cast the mother as the diseased, and her children as the diseased and disabled results of her unwanted pregnancies. Equating disease and disability with unwanted pregnancy was a bold, if not ableist, move by Sanger, and her assertion that unwanted pregnancy resulted in “condemn[ing] wives to ill-health and invalidism, caus[ing] children to be born feeble in mind and body” enacted a connection that Sanger continued to capitalize on throughout her editorship at the *BCR*.

She was not really introducing a new idea, however, since Elizabeth Cady Stanton had made the same type of argument many years prior in her 1885 Divorce Debate speech. Unwanted children were disabled children. They were feeble in mind and body. Most feminists would agree with Sanger and Cady Stanton that it was the right of the mother not to be burdened physically and emotionally by multiple births that would take their toll on her body and on her family’s financial security, but many have failed to question the rest of Cady Stanton and Sanger’s arguments. As a result, the corporeally exclusionary narrative that Sanger reinforced was one that claimed there was no place for the disabled child in US society. For Sanger, and others, whether the disability was physical, cognitive, or psychological, the child was not only a burden for the mother, but for society as well. As advocates for the mother, Cady Stanton and Sanger employed ableist rhetoric, capitalizing on the negative attitudes towards disease and disability in a society that was already denying citizenship to immigrants who did not meet physical or cognitive ideals.<sup>216</sup> With this ableist rhetoric as her foundation, it was not long before

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216. See Baynton.

Sanger's role as advocate for women turned to advocate for population control, denying the right of choice for many women based on their race, class, and ethnicity. Women should no longer choose when to prevent pregnancy; society (led by Sanger and other eugenic feminists) would determine that certain women should not have children or what that number of children should be. The individual choice would be replaced by involuntary birth control, via sterilization or other methods.

This was made very clear in the third issue of the *BCR* (1917), which contained an article titled, "Mothers First!" by Charles Zubin.<sup>217</sup> Zubin also capitalized on the immigration scare that was successfully stirring up middle-class white Americans (and black Americans, alike):

We limit immigrants; we hold them up at the nation's portals and inquire into their pedigree, their health, their sanity; why do we not choose our natives? Why do we let midwives guide them into their native land? Why do we let ignorant mothers bear untimely and unwelcome children? Do we not care enough for the nation's native citizenship to fortify potential mothers with the knowledge that will guarantee welcome, healthy children at the time when the mother can give them wise and loving care?<sup>218</sup>

This disability rhetoric had become all too familiar at this point, considering that Cady Stanton and other supporters of limited suffrage had utilized similar arguments against immigrants in order to bolster their own rights arguments for voting back in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, as explored in Chapters Two and Three of

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217. C. Zubin, "Mothers First!," *The Birth Control Review* (April/May 1917): 4.

218. *Ibid.*

this project. After all, an unwanted pregnancy was not just about the mother not wanting to have a child, it was also about a society that did not want certain parts of the population increasing in number, threatening their middle-class and/or white lifestyle. And according to Zubin and the proponents of eugenics, society also did not want the additional burden of providing for disabled bodies that could not support themselves or their families. The disability-based argument extended the decision to have (or not have) children beyond the mother to society as a result.

Zubin used the limitations placed on immigrants in order to support the limitations that eugenic feminists wanted to place on poor and ignorant women's reproductive rights. His argument could have been contextualized as an argument for educating mothers, if the last part of his statement was considered separately. Did we not care enough to educate potential mothers about family planning and birth control? But, his argument began with a connection to immigration and the limits placed by our government on the pedigree, health, and sanity of those that we would allow to enter the country as immigrants.

Having already established that we would not let these kinds of people into our country, he then questioned why we would let these types of children be born into our country. Whether his argument was about physical or cognitive disability, this type of argumentation demonstrated his underlying argument against the reproduction of bodies that could be claimed as ignorant or unfit as the result of their disabled status. Presenting an argument for protecting the native citizenship, Zubin made a corporeally exclusionary connection between immigrants and the reproduction of unfit children by paralleling immigration requirements with reproduction requirements. If a native woman could be

held to the same standards as immigrants, based on “pedigree, health, and sanity,” it would follow that she could also be denied rights that other women were allowed to claim based on those same requirements/standards. This able-bodied construction of fitness Zubin proposed targeted uneducated and uninformed women, or any woman classified as cognitively inferior, of whom most would be of poor and lower class.

The first year of the *BCR* also featured articles from medical professionals which supported Sanger’s own teaching and philosophies, such as A.L. Goldwater’s “The Need for Free Discussion of Birth Control Methods.”<sup>219</sup> Goldwater’s asserted that the need for knowledge of and access to birth control methods was the need to “prevent the multiplication of the imbecile, the epileptic, the consumptive,” the “defectives and perverts who are increasing so much more rapidly than the more normal members of the community.”<sup>220</sup> A medical perspective of disability engaged by a doctor would not be uncommon, and would, apparently, be much more blatantly ableist, but Sanger’s choice to publish it in the second edition of the *BCR* demonstrated her support of this medicalized and normalizing need for birth control. Numerous medical experts advocated birth control in the *BCR* throughout its years of publication, arguing that elimination of the defectives would bring about the betterment of society. Involving medical doctors may have been a political strategy for Sanger and other birth control advocates, but it also engaged a medical model view of disability that could and would be used in order to classify women as fit or unfit to produce children.<sup>221</sup>

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219. A.L. Goldwater, “The Need for Free Discussion of Birth Control Methods,” *The Birth Control Review* (March 1917): 5.

220. *Ibid.*

221. Garland-Thomson 87-88.

Preventing the births of cognitively or physically unfit babies was important to eugenic theory supporters of the early twentieth century. But, why was it such an important part of women's rights rhetoric, as well? It was important because women were relying on their role as mothers to establish their place in society. In order to do so, motherhood itself had to be monitored and regulated in order to protect women's "sphere of influence." The maternalist feminism that was strongly rooted by this point in women's rights discourses may very well have been the reason for this type of argument among leading advocates of birth control and family planning. Birth control was necessary not just for the mother, to un-complicate her life financially and to alleviate the physical burden multiple pregnancies placed on women's bodies. It was also a necessary tool for the mother to fulfill her role as the creator of the future, the decision-maker, the population improver, the gynecological guardian of the race. A race peopled with "imbeciles, epileptics, consumptives, defectives, and perverts" was not a strong race, not a race that was worthy of fighting for. And, it was women's responsibility to keep these types of children from being born. Eliminating unwanted children meant eliminating disability and improving society.

Sanger's work started under the premise of supporting poor women and giving them the power to make decisions about their own bodies and reproduction, but the articles she wrote and published also relied on one very important reason that middle-class white women might also support birth control—population control. Not only were they advocating for their own right to decide, but for their right to decide which women should and should not be producing off-spring.

Clinging to their roles as the saviors and protectors of the race, many women, black and white, embraced a maternal feminism that allowed them to label women as “responsible” and “irresponsible,” based on able-bodied standards for reproductive rights and decisions. *BCR* articles such as Caroline Nelson’s “On Changing the Law” (1917) overtly claimed that particular women should and should not be reproducing: “Instead of calling birth control among the poor and deficient a crime, it should be preached to them as a sacred duty. The laws must be changed.”<sup>222</sup> Nelson’s statement demonstrated the inherent conflicts within the birth control/population control movement. Did the laws need to be changed in order to protect all women? Or, did the laws need to be changed to protect white middle-class able-bodied society from the “poor and deficient (disabled),” whose duty it would be to control their birthrate, while Nelson and others like her could reproduce as they wished?

S. Adolphus Knopf’s speech for the American Public Health Association in Cincinnati in 1917 was published under the title, “An Arsenal of Argument.”<sup>223</sup> Knopf overtly stated that reducing the population was not his goal, but increasing its strength was.<sup>224</sup> His plan for this was to “reduc[e] the number of the physically, mentally and morally unfit and add [...] to the number of physically strong, mentally sound and more

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222. C. Nelson, “On Changing the Law” *The Birth Control Review* (December 1917): 4.

223. S. A. Knopf, “An Arsenal of Argument,” *The Birth Control Review* (December 1917): 8. This was a publication of a speech that Knopf gave at American Public Health Association in Cincinnati on November 27, 1917.

224. Another example of such argument is “Efficiency and Moral Liberty,” Samuel Bernard’s short piece in the same issue of the *BCR* called for the prevention of “cripples and unfit which are a burden to all of us.” Bernard’s construction of cripples and unfit stemmed from the same rationale used by Sanger and others earlier – they were the result of unwanted pregnancy and unfit parents. “We’d thus have children which mothers, with the mother instinct, desired and wished for, and to which both parents were able to give proper attention and to bring up properly.”

highly developed men and women.”<sup>225</sup> While a positive eugenics stance would support the births of better babies by better mothers, Knopf’s plan was to reduce the number of inferior births that resulted from inferior mothers. If this wasn’t a plan for the reduction of our population as a whole, it was certainly a call for reducing a particular population in our society—those considered undeveloped, morally unfit, physically weak, and mentally unstable. His argument, like many others during this time period, relied on a corporeally exclusionary narrative, but its fulfillment was being placed squarely in the laps of inferior women. Thus, Knopf utilized an argument that appeared to be motivated by positive eugenics (more and better births), but was achieved through negative eugenics (controlling who was reproducing and limiting reproduction among inferior groups).

Knopf believed that birth control methods needed to be taught to tuberculosis and venereal disease patients to prevent births of “unfortunate children” who were “handicapped for life and a burden to the community.”<sup>226</sup> While birth control may have been a warranted recommendation for those who would pass on tuberculosis to their children in a time period when TB was not easily treated or cured, and warnings against reproduction among those with syphilis and other venereal diseases was certainly understandable, the reality was that many bodies were classified as diseased and vulnerable based on their race, ethnicity, and class, whether they had TB/venereal disease or were simply weak and diseased from poverty and living conditions. Birth control was preached as the duty and responsibility of these populations, in order to prevent a burden on society. It was not just coincidence that these groups of people were classified as less

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225. Knopf 8.

226. Knopf 8.

intelligent (cognitively), weaker in physical strength (physically), and morally (psychologically) disabled.

Female doctors, such as Anna E. Blount, were also represented on the pages of the *Birth Control Review*. In her essay, “Eugenics in Relation to Birth Control,” Blount argued that the eugenicist was a radical because:

He would purge the world of imbeciles, epileptics and the insane by ceasing to breed them. With no harm to any human individual, he would eliminate in time those of surpassing moral and physical ugliness.<sup>227</sup>

Blount was advocating for a negative eugenics in order to control population improvement. Many states established “ugly laws”, the undoubted friend of the eugenicist, which could be used to keep people with physical, cognitive, and psychological disabilities from being in public places, as long as they could be claimed as a disruption to normalized social interaction or if their exterior aesthetic was deemed upsetting or disturbing to those who would have to see them. Many of these laws remained on the books in multiple US states well into the twenty first century.<sup>228</sup>

Ugly laws were not just about physical aesthetics, but also about protecting society from those that were deemed psychologically unfit or dangerous. Their immorality was determined by their behavior and their behaviors were often in conflict with normative society because of their cognitive or psychological disabilities. Attaching morality to “ugly laws” allowed states allowed for a broader interpretation of the

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227. A. E. Blount, “Eugenics in Relation to Birth Control,” *The Birth Control Review* (Jan 1918): 7, 13.

228. Susan Schweik’s *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* provides a well-articulated account of ugly laws that stemmed not just from physical deformity and disability, but from race, gender, sexuality, and class.

corporeally exclusionary narratives of independence, assimilation, and responsible citizenship, further excluding the disabled body from the public sphere.

Blount's distress came not just from the overproduction of unacceptable (disabled) bodies, but also from the fact that superior babies were being limited as demonstrated by the lower birth rates of white middle- and upper-class women.<sup>229</sup> Her negative eugenic rhetoric was combined with a positive eugenics that advocated for the birth of more babies from "families of scientists" and other superior, quality reproducers. In both cases, Blount was denying entire groups of women reproductive freedom. Blount clearly privileged cognitive ability when she stated:

But to have unlimited families of imbeciles, and strongly limited families of scientists is disastrous, unless somebody can prove that we need more imbeciles than scientists. To have thousands of unwelcome children from overworked working women, and to have a one-child family or spinsterhood for women geniuses is equally as disastrous.<sup>230</sup>

While her concern for unwanted children is to be heralded, the fact that she lamented few or no births from women who would be geniuses confirmed the cognitive ableism that Sanger supported through her choices of published texts in multiple issues of the *BCR*.

Blount closed her essay with these words:

God speed the day when the unwilling mother, with her weak puny body, her sad, anaemic unlovely face, and her dependent whine, will be no more.

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229. Numerous essays in the 1917-1918 issues of the *Birth Control Review* discuss the decrease in birth rates among white middle class women.

230. Blount 7 and 13.

In that day we shall see a race of American thoroughbreds, if not the  
superman.<sup>231</sup>

Her connection of unwilling motherhood to weakness, sadness, anemia, un-loveliness, and dependency warrants interrogation. As earlier women's rights activists had done before her, Blount connected dependency to fitness. I question Blount's assumption that those unwilling mothers were only to be found among a particular population group—the poor and/or dependent. After all, Blount had just lamented the fact that intelligent women were only having one child or were spinsters with no children at all. Was it not possible that these women were unwilling mothers? Would Blount classify them in the same manner that she had those mothers she believed must be unwilling if they were poor, unhealthy, unattractive, and dependent? Blount did not want all unwilling mothers to have the right to limit reproduction, just those that would add to the roles of epileptic, imbecilic, and insane. She wanted women geniuses to reproduce in order that they might produce "American thoroughbreds, if not the superman." And that superman, according to Blount's rationale, would certainly not come from the body of a weak, dependent, unattractive, disabled working woman. Utilizing her concern for the production of unfit and disabled children, Blount reinforced a corporeally exclusionary narrative of motherhood that eliminated women based on their perceived physical, cognitive, and/or psychological abilities. Much of the work selected by Sanger for publication in the early years of the *BCR* followed similar patterns of argument, rhetoric, and discrimination against women and children with disabilities. Sanger's involvement in the birth control movement did not end with this journal, but extended itself into the founding of clinics

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231. Blount 13.

(for poor and black women), production of educational materials, and traveling lectures. Her philosophies of birth control (eugenic or not) had a significant impact on US reproductive rights.

### **Negroes on “The Negro Problem”: Cognitive and Psychological Ableism**

Much of the scholarship on black women and birth control or family planning has addressed the reticence of the black community to embrace white social programs promoting birth control.<sup>232</sup> The control of their reproductive lives for hundreds of years in the US, as slaves, created a distrust of social programs that would work to control their reproduction once again. The method was very different, but it was control, nonetheless. But, as much as scholars have discussed the skepticism of these black men and women, there were also black men and women who addressed the need for responsible reproduction and family planning. Coming on the heels of black women’s clubs and reform movements, discussions of reproduction and birth control among black women still sounded very much like the racial uplift discourses of Mary Church Terrell and other NACW leaders. The legacy of ableist rhetoric is still present in the prescriptions of cognitive achievement for women, in order to improve themselves, their children, and the future of the race.

### ***Intelligent and Responsible Motherhood: Addie W. Hunton and Josie B. Hall***

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232. Angela Davis discusses this in *Age, Race, Class*, as does Dorothy Roberts in *Killing the Black Body*. Both women, however, do also address the fact that birth control was taking place among black women themselves, aside from the white social programs, and had been existent in Africa prior to slavery, as well as in the US during slavery and beyond. The tactics, for birth control, however, would have been very different in each place and time.

Addie W. Hunton, a black activist who worked with the Young Women's Christian Association, the National Association of Colored Women, and NAACP, spoke at The Negro Young People's Christian and Educational Congress in 1902, depicting reproduction as a sacred marital responsibility and duty, and emphasized the role of woman in this endeavor.<sup>233</sup> Hunton's rhetoric, finding its roots in the early moments of the NACW reform movements, would not have been unfamiliar to her audience.

Her focus on reproduction itself, however, was not what audiences may have heard from reformers previously, when the concern had been with homes and rearing children not necessarily targeted at actual reproductive choices. Hunton's concern was more about the woman's role in this process, rather than her reproductive rights. In fact, while she appeared to be more concerned about the rights of the child who would be produced, she constructed an implicit argument for a negative eugenics:

A child has a right to the inheritance of the very best of body and soul its parents can bestow. If these are not granted, the child is defrauded of its birth-right. There is no sin without its penalty, and for the violation of the most sacred office of the marital relation, the parents, the child and society all must inevitably suffer.<sup>234</sup>

Quite reminiscent of Cady Stanton's earlier sermon about the wages of sin resulting in wreaking masses of depravity and diseased, crippled, unloved and unwanted children, Hunton's claim provided a particularly complicated argument that even she did not fully

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233. A. W. Hunton, "A Pure Motherhood The Basis of Racial Integrity," *The Negro Young People's Christian and Educational Congress* (1902): 433.

234. Hunton 434.

explore in this brief speech. Hunton argued that a child deserved “the very best of body and soul its parents [could] bestow.” Did she acknowledge that some parents would be able to bestow more than others, and that the “very best” for one set of parents would not be the same as the “very best” for another? Or, should we read this to understand that if a parent could not bestow the “very best” upon their child, then they should not have a child? Or, was the “very best” a call for parents to make sure the children they produced were truly wanted and out of love, not byproducts of marital relations and religious beliefs that prevented the use of birth control? If a parent gave her or his very best, and that child was not what society would consider “the very best of body and soul,” then what? Hunton confused the argument further, claiming that a child who did not receive the very best was defrauded and that the punishment for the sin of the parents would be endured by the child and society. Was it then, to be assumed that any child who was born less than perfect was the result of its parents’ sin? Of an unwanted pregnancy?

According to Hunton’s logic—yes. In the last part of her speech, she claimed:

If the intelligent mothers of the race, who are trying to attune harmoniously all the powers of body and mind, thus giving a higher and purer life would concentrate their efforts at this peculiar point, we would soon diminish the number of poorly born, poorly bred and deformed children that we need only look out on the streets to see.<sup>235</sup>

This call to mothers to prevent the birth of deformed and poorly bred children was evident in the arguments of black women who were working to improve their own race. However, it specifically targeted black women of a particular class and level of

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235. Hunton 434-5.

education. Hunton's focus on "intelligent mothers of the race," was a cognitively ableist rhetoric that would significantly limit those women to whom she may have spoken, discriminating against women who did not meet cognitively ableist standards of intelligence. Much like Mary Church Terrell, Hunton appeared to be speaking to her fellow educated middle-class black women about those black women who needed to be educated and reformed, and this time the reform would target reproduction. According to Hunton, cognitive ability should be the determiner of whether or not a black woman should or could responsibly produce children. Hunton's argument promoted a corporeally exclusionary narrative that focused on cognitive and psychological ability as markers of fitness, and placed a woman's morality in jeopardy should she choose to reproduce unwisely.

Hunton's rhetoric created a very complicated discourse for black women who were fighting for citizenship rights, but were being told that their ultimate responsibility as citizens was to reproduce responsibly. While arguing for the citizenship rights of black women, Hunton and others were also arguing against reproductive rights of lower-class and unfit black women. Whether the discourse promoted births among superior black women or mandatory birth control for lower-class, unfit black women, eugenic feminism among black women created class tensions while articulating an ableism that discriminated on the basis of perceived cognitive and psychological (moral) ability.

Josie B. Hall's focus on hereditary aspects of reproduction was influenced by a positive eugenics whose stated purpose was the improvement of her own race. Hall, as a supporter of the "cult of true womanhood" and separate gendered spheres was not what one might consider a traditional feminist or women's rights activist, black or white. She

was an educator and writer who wrote about her concerns regarding the black race. In *Hall's Moral and Mental Capsule for the Economic and Domestic Life of the Negro, as a solution of the race problem* (1905), she provided a diagnosis of her race. Hall's articulation of infectious disease was integral to the overall argument she made in the opening of her text:

Diseases which may be imparted from one person to another are known as infectious diseases. Infectious diseases are carried in different ways. They can be communicated by actual contact with a diseased person; they can be conveyed by touch; they can be conveyed by air; they may be carried in water; they may be carried by clothes, and in some instances the germs live in certain districts, and only affect the people of that district.

Through a careful analysis of the race I have discovered that the majority of Negroes' minds and hearts are affected with one of these infectious diseases, which is pulling them back instead of forward.<sup>236</sup>

Establishing infectious disease as one of the primary problems of the Negro race, Hall's work would appear to be concerned with social issues regarding health and illness among her people. But, her assertion that the "minds and hearts" of her people have been infected opened up her words to be more figurative than literal in meaning, and created a moment of narrative prosthesis that allowed for disability to stand in as a negatively defining characteristic of her people. The infectious diseases that Hall referred to were more likely related to the belief systems, morality, civility, and character of the race,

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236. J. B. Hall, *Hall's Moral and Mental Capsule for the Economic and Domestic Life of the Negro, as a solution of the race problem*, (1905): 5.

rather than infectious diseases that would literally maim or kill. Hall diagnosed the problems of the race not just as biological (medical), but moral and social as well:

‘Tis true that as a race we are morally and intellectually weak [...]  
[A]s I look upon the skeleton, the bones of its moral relations, social relations, and conditions, stand before me in horrid deformity [...]<sup>237</sup>

Much of what Hall discussed in her “Capsule” was concerned with moral improvements within her race, but her use of illness and disease as disability metaphor, particularly narrative prosthesis, is worth noting as part of a eugenics driven reproductive reform discourse that took place among black leaders in different parts of the country.

Hall’s work addressed the moral issues, which were directly linked to cognitive ability and psychological ability. As previously established in black women’s discourses on womanhood and rights, only a person with a strong intellect could make rational and responsible choices, and any black man or woman could be part of Hall’s discourse of “horrid deformity” of her race. Hall’s connection of infectious disease to moral and intellectual weakness constructed an able-bodied metaphor that would support her corporeally exclusionary narrative—a narrative that viewed the “majority of Negroes’ minds and hearts” as cognitively and psychologically disabled. They were a race in need of fixing. According to Hall, they would need to be fixed intellectually and morally, in order to achieve an able-bodied status and be viewed as worthy citizens.

While Hall’s version of “infectious diseases” could be acquired (and gotten rid of one might believe), she also explained that the race was not just affected by infectious disease, but by those that were hereditary, as well. It was this concern with hereditary

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237. Hall 4.

diseases that connected Hall's work to the Black Women's Club Movements and their work to better the lower classes of their race. Neither Hall nor the Black Women's Clubs were diagnosing middle and upper-class black Americans with hereditary "illness;" those bodies marked by hereditary disorders were those whose parents and grandparents were recognizably deficient in thought and deed—primarily the lower class:

Hence the illness of the race has not been brought about altogether by the present generation; but as far back as history records our ancestors have been affected with taints of impure character; therefore many impurities have been handed down to the present generation as legacy.<sup>238</sup>

This concern with the hereditary nature of impure character also demonstrated the influence of eugenic philosophy among black women during this period of reform. Parents and grandparents would be the root of the hereditary diseases inherited by those bodies in need of correction. Hall's hereditary concerns proved to be focused more on the mind and heart, rather than the body:

Some of the children have inherited diseased minds from parents or grandparents, and show signs of them when they enter their teens. Finally, those whose minds are affected by inheritance, home atmosphere or surroundings, have an inclination to give up; they begin to fall short of individual ideals; in fact, they seldom have ideals higher than that of their parents.

In other words, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree according to Hall's theory of heredity, morality, and will power. Hall's work may not have directly advocated for

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238. Hall 7.

eugenics in regards to birth control and family planning, but her ideas about the black race at the time were certainly eugenic in nature. Her beliefs that the race was tainted and that it needed to cure itself of infectious and hereditary diseases, in order to better the race, were the foundation of her ableist argument in *Capsule*. As many had before her, Hall placed the responsibility for the eradication of disease and the cure of moral infection primarily in the hands of the mother. It was not just a genetic responsibility, but also a responsibility to provide a home environment and a social upbringing that would improve the race. Closing her introduction to the booklet she exhorted her people to utilize her “capsule” in order to cure their own illness, but her focus on women was obvious. “May this capsule bring with it new life to the race, heroic womanhood and stalwart motherhood, virtuous girls and industrious boys, worthy parents and better born children.”<sup>239</sup> Hall had articulated the responsibility of the worthy parent, or the fit mother, and in so doing, she also constructed the “unfit” mother in the process—the mother who would not take her “capsule,” and would continue to let hereditary disease spread through her reproductive choices.

Gender studies scholar, Stephanie Athey, has written about race and reproductive technology, as well as eugenic feminisms in black and white women’s organizations of the late-nineteenth century. Athey’s work has focused specifically on Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper, pointing out that while there may be apparent contradictions in the work of female African American writers during this time period, the context of the work within the fight against racist oppression needs to be taken into consideration. She also notes that the African American female’s use of the “politics of respectability” feeds

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239. Hall 10.

directly into the morality codes that were established by eugenic philosophers, as well as the “eugenic discourses of degeneracy.” African American women also employed the “female sovereignty” argument in the same manner that white women did, placing the responsibility for the “purification of the race,” whether it was black or white, in the hands of mothers.<sup>240</sup> However, their corporeally exclusionary construction of the female, based on cognitive and psychological markers of fitness, complicated their arguments because it barred some groups of women from the very same reproductive rights that black women were fighting for during this early period of the eugenics movement.<sup>241</sup>

**The Birth Control Review: Negroes on the “Negro Problem”?**

*[...] the mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among whites, is from that part of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly.*

W.E.B. DuBois, “Black Folk and Birth Control,” 1932

By 1932, Margaret Sanger was no longer the editor of the *Birth Control Review*.

On March 1, 1932, editor Stella Hanau sent a letter to W.E.B. Du Bois asking for his assistance in planning the June 1932 issue of the *BCR*:

I am planning a special Negro number for June and wonder if I might go over my plans with you sometimes within the next few weeks. Will you

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240. For other black women speaking on hereditary concerns, female sovereignty, and the uplifting of the Negro race see A. Hunt Logan. “Prenatal and Hereditary Influences: Social and Physical Conditions of Negroes in Cities and Proceedings of the Second Conference for the Study of Problems Concerning Negro City Life, (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1897); M. Bass, “Nature or Environment,” *The Woman's Era* (Vol 2, No. 7).

241. Stephanie Athey, “Eugenic Feminisms in Late Nineteenth-Century America: Reading Race in Victoria Woodhull, Frances Willard, Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells,” *Genders* 31 (2000). Web. 1 January 2016.

appoint a time entirely at your convenience? I have gotten together a good many names for possible articles, but am very much in need of your advice in laying out the entire subject.<sup>242</sup>

The issue Hanau was planning would have sixteen pieces: fourteen written by men and two by women. Only one of those women was black. Selected by Hanau (with the eventual approval of W.E.B. Du Bois), many of the voices represented in this issue of the *BCR* had also served on the Advisory Board of the Harlem Birth Control Clinic, founded by Margaret Sanger and organized by Hannah M. Stone (one of the women represented in this issue). The men asked to represent Negroes in the discussion of Negroes and birth control were doctors, civic leaders, legislators, and a zoologist/eugenicist. The lone, black woman was a social worker. While my focus in the project thus far has been primarily on the voices of women in women's rights discourses, these male (and female) voices in the "Negro number" were representative of those working as advocates for black women in regards to reproductive access.

While Margaret Sanger had formed the National Advisory Council in Brooklyn, as a consulting group for her Brooklyn Birth Control Clinic that primarily served black women, there were few women on this council. Of those women that were on the council, I could not locate any public speeches or texts that spoke directly to birth control. Professor of English, Farah Jasmine Griffin confirms that there is little to find on birth control from black female intellectuals:

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<sup>242</sup> S. Hanau, *Letter from Birth Control Review to W. E. B. Du Bois*, in W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, 1 Mar 1932. Web. 1 April 2016.

Interestingly, where others have found the seeds of an emasculating black matriarchy, DuBois applauds the emergence of economically independent black women. Furthermore, he asserts the necessity of women's control over their reproduction [...] He writes, "Not by guarding the weak in weaknesses do we gain strength, but by making weakness free and strong" (1995, 300). This is as progressive a stance on black women to emerge from the pen of a black man since Frederick Douglass. It echoes the demands of feminists such as Anna Julia Cooper and Margaret Sanger. In fact, it is doubtful that even black women thinkers were as explicit in their demands. For the most part, it is only in the context of veiled allusions in their fiction that black women writers and thinkers of the time approach any discussion of sexuality and birth control.<sup>243</sup>

Additionally, the historical texts written about black women and birth control and black women and reproductive rights, rarely (if ever) refer to specific speeches or essays written by black women about birth control specifically. Some refer to education talks given at churches and to women working with the NACW regarding reproductive rights, but they do not cite specific speeches or texts that could be located. Much of the work written about black women and birth control (in texts written by black men and women) during this time period (1900-1932) refers to Margaret Sanger, the Brooklyn Clinic, and the National Advisory Council. Specific women and specific public texts are not

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243. F. J. Griffin, "Black Feminists and Du Bois: Respectability, Protection, and Beyond," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568, The Study of African American Problems: W. E. B. Du Bois's Agenda, Then and Now (Mar 2000) 28-40. 31-32. The citation within the text is from W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Damnation of Women," in D. Levering Lewis, ed., *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Henry Holt 1995).

mentioned in historical texts until the 1950s and beyond.<sup>244</sup> For all of these reasons, I have chosen to use a significant public text produced about black women and birth control (*Birth Control Review*, June 1932), even while the voices in this document are primarily men.

The edition began with an introductory essay by an unidentified contributor (likely the editor, Stella Hanau, based on her letter above) enumerating the concerns of the Negro problem regarding their poverty and “submerged condition.”<sup>245</sup> Hanau separated herself from the constituency of black men and women as she claimed that she “enlisted the aid of Negroes prominent in various fields” to provide a Negro account of the Negro problem and the possible solution that birth control would provide.<sup>246</sup> What I found most interesting about this essay was Hanau’s curiosity about “what extent birth control has had a eugenic effect upon the Negro race.”<sup>247</sup> The author reached this question upon considering that the:

[...] upper strata of Negroes, like that of the whites, practice birth control. This raises an interesting question. For whereas white society was already highly stratified long before the introduction of modern contraception, the Negroes, at the time of their emancipation, were relatively undifferentiated into classes.<sup>248</sup>

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244. See Davis, L. Gordon, Gaines, Mitchell, Nelson, and Roberts.

245. Stella Hanau was the editor and Annie G Porritt was the chairman of the *BCR*’s editorial board at the time of the June 1932 publication.

246. See Hanau’s letter to DuBois above.

247. Hanau, ed., “Opening Editorial,” *The Birth Control Review* (June 1932): 163.

248. *Ibid.*

The author questioned whether this use of birth control had had a eugenic effect upon the Negro race. I read this concern two ways: one, that the author was looking for a possible reason to promote birth control among the Negro race, as its use seemed to have allowed certain groups to rise to an upper strata. Claiming that, “The social history of the Negro affords unique laboratory material in a study of this aspect of the birth control problem,”<sup>249</sup> the author appeared to have been searching for a cause/effect relationship between birth control and the social/economic standing of Negroes in the 1930s. If, indeed, birth control availability was the reason that some Negroes were lifted into an upper stratum, and others remained in the lower stratum, then birth control could be the Great Saviour.

The other way this can be read is as a desire to curtail the less desirable and less able-bodied of the Negro population via birth control. Hanau explained that Negroes were brought in to discuss the subject, as the Negro problem could only be solved by addressing “both sides of the question and promote[ing] the general welfare of the nation as a whole.” To begin this issue with a claim of a “Negro Problem” set up an atmosphere of “us versus them” that would continue throughout Hanau’s article. But, this us/them binary was not as much racial in nature as it was ableist in its condemnation of the less than fit lower classes. Both Hanau (and her white constituency) and W.E.B. DuBois (and the other black men represented in the issue) shared the desire to eradicate disease and disability from the Negro population in order to create a stronger race and a better society.

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249. Ibid.

While the “Negro problem” was a racist notion, what the Negroes (primarily men who were middle/upper class) had to say in this issue of the *BCR* was ableist, as well as classist and sexist. Upper-class black men were continuing to reinforce the corporeally exclusionary narrative constructed by white men and women, but their exclusions were based more on disability-driven class arguments rather than those that portrayed the race as fundamentally disabled. Their arguments could not mimic those of white birth control advocates who were claiming unfitness for entire races and ethnicities based on cognitively ableist standards. Fighting the corporeally exclusionary narratives constructed against their own race, they constructed and reinforced, corporeally exclusionary narratives that targeted lower classes of black people as cognitive, physical, and psychological inferiors.

The first article in this issue was written by George S. Schuyler, “editor of the *National News*, a Negro weekly published in Harlem.”<sup>250</sup> “Quantity or Quality?” began with a definitive statement, “There is no great opposition to birth control among the twelve million brown Americans.”<sup>251</sup> Schuyler’s argument about the need for birth control among Negro populations relied on his assumption that, “This tremendous burden rests heaviest upon the shoulders of the Negro women, who in all urban centers exceed the men in number.”<sup>252</sup> Not unlike white and black women who spoke before him, Schuyler placed the burden for family planning and societal improvement at the feet of women. But, he argued that this particular problem (the Negro Problem) was the burden

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250. G. S. Schuyler, “Quantity or Quality?” *The Birth Control Review* (June 1932):165-166.

251. Schuyler 165.

252. Ibid.

of Negro urban women. I wonder whether or not Schuyler would promote birth control for women of the “upper strata” referred to by the journal’s opening essay. Why was it that the excess of urban black women made birth control their burden to bear? And, I question which “brown Americans” Schuyler was referring to when he said:

Brown Americans are somewhat different because they have been forced to face more frankly the hard facts of life. More of them take a realistic rather than a romantic attitude toward marriage and children. Life at best is for them a grim battle, when children come, it is frequently a losing one. No wonder one sometimes hears a colored woman say "it's a sin to bring a black child into the world"<sup>253</sup>

We may not have disagreed with Schuyler when he argued that the rate of infant deaths, juvenile delinquency, illegitimate births, maternal illness and fatigue, and financial security would all be improved if birth control was practiced among the “Negro urban female population.” After all, the same could be said regarding lower class urban white populations in the US at the time. But, his targeting of Negro urban women provided another example of the ableist classism among black populations in this time period. As stated above, the influence of the black women’s social clubs was still evident in conversations surrounding motherhood and responsibility. And, Schuyler placed the burden of birth control at the feet of Negro urban women—the poor, the unmarried, the illegitimate, the unfit.

While Schuyler’s comment appeared to be extremely classist in nature (I hesitate to say racist since he’s writing about his own race), his extended argument demonstrated

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253. Schuyler 165-166.

that he was aiming at not only a lower-class Negro woman, but also one that he would have classified as unfit mentally and psychologically. His ableist rhetoric allowed him to claim lower classes as unfit because of their perceived cognitive and psychological disabilities. As I have demonstrated in previous examples, this link between ability and class was not new among white or black proponents for women's rights. As such, Schuyler may have considered the following his strongest point:

After all, a woman is biologically a child factory, as a cow is a milk factory and a hen an egg factory. Certain ingredients of a certain quality are necessary to produce a healthy child under proper conditions of rest and security. If these are absent, the child will usually be an inferior product. Unfortunately, the offspring of the lower economic classes fill the morgues, jails and hospitals largely for this very reason.<sup>254</sup>

Schuyler, like many other "Negroes" writing for this issue of the *BCR*, ignored the very social injustices and economic hardships that he referred to earlier when he claimed that the morgues, jails and hospitals were filled with the bodies of lower economic classes because of their production of inferior offspring.<sup>255</sup> His argument, taken in its entirety,

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254. Schuyler 166.

255. In the very same issue, Charles S. Johnson's "Question of Negro Health" articulated the effects of poverty on the Negro population regarding health, but only focused on birth control as a solution when there were more social, political, and institutional resolutions that could have been found for poverty. He was also an advocate for "intelligent discrimination and population selection" among "undesirable groups." And, in "Eugenics for the Negro," Elmer Carter focuses on the dysgenic use of birth control among the Negro population. "The probabilities are that the race problem in American is infinitely aggravated by the presence of too many unhappily born, sub-normals, morons, and imbeciles of both races." Carter acknowledges the "handicaps" that Negro children are born under, but is more concerned that unfit populations are still overproducing and that the truly fit are not producing enough. Rather than address the "handicaps," Carter focused on controlling the population. And, Constance Fisher's "The Negro social worker evaluates birth control" article claimed, "In many instances the case worker sees the need for birth control where and when the couple involved do not. Where there is low mentality, a serious health impairment, or other very obvious complications, it is very easy to see the need for information of this sort." Her remedy for social struggles was controlling births among those she deemed "obviously

blamed urban Negro women for producing inferior offspring because these women did not contain “certain ingredients of a certain quality” that would produce better offspring. The disabled body was producing disabled bodies.

Rather than address the social structures causing a lot of the death, illness, and incarceration of so many urban Negro youth, Schuyler capitalized on the already established arguments of inferior stock and mother’s responsibility (as we can see years earlier in both Hunton and Hall’s work). The absence of “certain ingredients and quality,” according to Schuyler’s rationale meant that urban Negro women should make the choice not to reproduce, because, according to him, “No wonder one sometimes hears a colored woman say ‘it’s a sin to bring a black child into the world.’”<sup>256</sup> Was this what Schuyler believed Negro urban women should be saying and basing their reproductive choices on? What were the “certain ingredients and quality” that Schuyler referred to? Were they defined in physical ability, cognitive ability, and /or psychological ability? This corporeally exclusionary narrative utilized “baking” as a metaphor for categorizing particular women (urban Negroes) as unfit to reproduce. Preaching a mandatory birth control for these women, Schuyler’s argument did not appear to be much different from the white women’s rights advocates who were already denying reproductive freedom to black women. He, and the other men in this issue of the *BCR*, created not only a ableist argument for birth control, but one that was also sexist, in the guise of bettering the race.

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complicated,” rather than working as a social worker to improve the conditions for those under her purview. Even one of the book reviews at the end of the volume found itself focused on segregation, sterilization and birth control as the remedy for “The Mental Defective a Problem in Social Inefficiency.” The book, by Berry and Gordon, was reviewed by Howard Becker, who also focused on the need for all three of the above tactics in order to control the reproduction of “mental defectives.” Although Becker points out that there were issues of classification for mental defectives, he failed to address this issue as a matter of importance and instead focused on control and discipline measures.

256. Schuyler 166.

Schuyler's final argument, posed as a question/answer was:

The question for Negroes is this Shall they go in for quantity or quality in children? Shall they bring children into the world to enrich the undertakers, the physicians and furnish work for social workers and jailers, or shall they produce children who are going to be an asset to the group and to American society Most Negroes, especially the women, would go In for quality production if they only knew how.<sup>257</sup>

Was it education or genetics that Schuyler was targeting, however? Was Schuyler saying that all children produced by urban Negro women were going to be capital for undertakers and physicians, or “work for social workers and jailers,” or just excess children? If women went for quality over quantity, would the “Negro problem” be fixed among urban Negro women? Or, would the ableist rhetoric still continue to exclude urban Negro women because they could continue to be classified as disabled.

The earlier part of his argument seemed to be targeting a class of women whom he deemed to lack “certain qualities” that would produce quality children. But, the latter part of the argument appeared to address the “know how” of birth control. If only they knew how. But, what if they did know how, but they chose not to? How then, might Schuyler have responded? Would it still be the urban Negro woman's responsibility to limit her births and the responsibility of the middle-class educated Negro woman to expand hers? Would Schuyler react, as others in this issue of *BCR* did, by claiming Negro birth control at this time was dysgenic?<sup>258</sup> Would he, like Charle Johnson and

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257. Schuyler 166.

258. Dysgenic: exerting a detrimental effect on later generations through the inheritance of undesirable characteristics.

Elmer Carter (referred to in the footnote above), have argued that it was not only the duty of urban Negro women to limit their births, but also the duty of middle-class Negro women to not limit their births? Focusing on cognitive ability, “if women only ‘knew’,” Schuyler would likely not have argued that both classes of black women were responsible for bettering the black race through choices about reproduction. After all, middle class black women were more likely to be cognitively acceptable than lower class women. Schuyler’s focus was only on the bodies of those urban Negro women that he felt did not contain the cognitive qualities and ingredients that he, and many others, believed were necessary to “bake” a new generation.

In “Black Folk and Birth Control,” W.E.B. DuBois seemed to contradict the opening essay of this *BCR* issue when he said, “birth control was secretly exercised by the more intelligent slaves, as we know from many reminiscences.”<sup>259</sup> DuBois’s argument becomes poignant because of his use of the qualifier “intelligent” when discussing the slaves who were using birth control. Did intelligence determine the use of birth control, or did the use of birth control determine the level of access one would have to education and the level of intelligence one could achieve? Wasn’t there already an intellectual stratification among those slaves who were released to “freedom?” Weren’t some already educated and able to read, which set them apart from those who were released with no means of securing education. According to DuBois, the stratification was already evident after emancipation. And, not only was it based on intelligence, but also on religion:

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259. W.E.B. Du Bois, “Black Folk and Birth Control,” *The Birth Control Review* (June 1932): 166-167.

After emancipation, there arose the inevitable clash of ideals between those Negroes who were striving to improve their economic position and those whose religious faith made the limitation of children a sin. The result, among the more intelligent class, was a postponement of marriage which greatly decreased the number of children.<sup>260</sup>

DuBois set up a binary between those striving to improve their economic position and those who were religious. In fact, it would appear that DuBois was separating the intelligent from the unintelligent religious when he made the above claims. Equating intelligence with delayed marriage and decreased reproduction, DuBois reinforced the same arguments that Schuyler and Johnson and Carter were making in the journal—birth control was the solution. Like white women’s rights advocates, DuBois and other Negro authors in this issue were arguing that women (particularly black women) should have access to birth control, but their reasons for advocating for birth control were cognitively ableist in nature.

DuBois was also clear about his attitude towards the lower classes and their reproductive choices. Like Schuyler and Carter, he bemoaned the dysgenic use of birth control among Negroes, but failed to address the social inequalities as the root of the problem and focused only on controlling his own population:

In addition to this, the low income which Negroes receive, make bachelorhood and spinsterhood widespread, with the naturally resultant lowering, in some cases, of sex standards. On the other hand, the mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the

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260. Du Bois, “Black Folk and Birth Control” 166.

increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among whites, is from that part of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly.<sup>261</sup>

It is at this point that I have to wonder who DuBois was writing for. Considering this edition of the journal was supposed to be “Negroes on Negroes,” were we really supposed to believe that DuBois was writing for his own people? Or, might DuBois have been writing for Hanau, and people like her—white people who wanted to hear about the solutions to the “Negro problem,” but felt better about it coming from the mouth of Negroes. When DuBois decried the “mass of ignorant Negroes,” that were doing the heaviest populating in this time period, he was echoing the very same arguments already made in previous *BCR* issues about immigration and ethnicity standards and the responsibility of limited reproduction among poor and lower class white women.

DuBois also relied on the quantity versus quality argument espoused by Schuyler, as a means of refuting the desire for greater numbers of Negroes for survival purposes:

Moreover, they are quite led away by the fallacy of numbers. They want the black race to survive. They are cheered by a census return of increasing numbers and a high rate of increase. They must learn that among human races and groups, as among vegetables, quality and not mere quantity really counts.<sup>262</sup>

Reiterating the “certain ingredients” argument also made by Schuyler, DuBois reaffirmed the link between dis/ability and class that had been so masterfully constructed among white birth control proponents and applied it to his own people. After all, a vegetable

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261. Ibid.

262. DuBois, “Black Folk and Birth Control” 167.

metaphor would be easily understood by any class of Negro, and planting bad seeds would not make sense to anyone. But, DuBois's overt connection of class, intelligence, and ability throughout this piece, demonstrated the true "clash of ideals" that he referred to at the beginning of his essay; a clash of ideals that would continue to conflate intelligence and ability with class, and allow for poor women's bodies to be disciplined and controlled, in the guise of bettering society. DuBois, as Addie Hunton and Mary Church Terrell before him, continued to reinforce a corporeally exclusionary narrative that did not exclude black people as a whole, but barred those lower class, unfit, and inferior black bodies from access to voluntary reproductive choices.

While the black women engaged above (Hunton and Hall) were not speaking directly to birth control, they were speaking about reproductive choices that would influence the production of a better generation of black people. Their concern about heredity and the improvement of the race via motherhood engaged eugenic philosophies that allowed them to argue for a stronger race via reproductive choice. Conversely, the men representing Negro voices in the birth control discourses of this time period were speaking directly to birth control as part of their own eugenically influenced perceptions of their own people. The consistency of eugenic influence among black voices, female and male, was expressed via CENs that argued for a stronger race via cognitive and psychological improvement of the race.

### **Intersections of Ableism in Black and White Women's Reproductive Rights:**

Certainly, there are inherent contradictions between feminism and eugenics, but as the work above demonstrates, the two were not as diametrically opposed as one might

want to believe. Mary Ziegler's work on eugenic feminism has presented the contradictions and difficulties present in the writings of feminists who were also immersed in eugenic philosophy.<sup>263</sup> Ziegler demonstrated the ways in which feminist philosophy and eugenics philosophy do not cross paths. She made the important point that the universal embrace of eugenics in feminism was not a reality, but she does make it clear that women's organizations like "The National Federation of Women's Clubs, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the National League of Women Voters, and a variety of state and local feminist organizations at some point campaigned for eugenic legal reforms."<sup>264</sup>

These legal reforms came in the form of institutionalization, laws restricting marriage licenses, and eugenic sterilization laws. Ziegler's argument was that multiple eugenic feminisms emerged during 1890-1930, but the commonality of all of these, however, was their expediency based arguments that focused on the fact that the "eugenic decline of the race could be prevented only if women were granted greater political, social, sexual, and economic equality."<sup>265</sup> I would further argue that the commonality of these eugenic feminisms was their reliance on an ableism that allowed the construction of fitness and unfitness among women. Presented as "moral codes," ableist beliefs were employed to deem women "unfit" as mothers based on their sexual behavior, their intelligence, or on their perceived ability to financially care for the number of children they already had. Sexual behavior and morality could be linked to mental instability or

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263. M. Ziegler, "Eugenic Feminism: Mental Hygiene, The Women's Movement, and the Campaign for Eugenic Legal Reform, 1900-1935," *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender* 31 (2008): 211-235.

264. Ziegler 212.

265. Ziegler 213.

feble-mindedness, supporting the ableist-centered beliefs that disability and immorality were inextricable human characteristics. Fighting against the gendered sexual “moral codes” that were part of eugenic philosophy, women often succumbed to the same morality based arguments when they discussed women’s sovereignty over their own bodies. Among black and white birth control advocates, arguing that a “responsible” woman would understand her role in “purifying the race” and “creating a superior race” by limiting the amount of children she had and caring for those children in a more efficient manner, birth control advocates constructed their own ideal mother.

Whether advocates utilized “responsible” or “intelligent” or “dutiful” or “patriotic” as an adjective to describe the ideal mother, the message would be the same: The fit mother was an able-bodied one who would produce wanted, loved, superior children who would not be a burden on society and who would further the progress of the race—a positive eugenics. And, the unfit mother, who undoubtedly had to be told she was unfit, would understand that it was her responsibility not to produce inferior/disabled children that would be a burden on society and denigrate the race—a negative eugenics. Positive eugenics would be enacted along with negative eugenics; superior births would be promoted while undesired births would be limited or eliminated. Disability would be corrected and eliminated through selective reproduction.

It should not be surprising that many family planning and birth control advocates, men and women, fell in line with much of the rhetoric of the mainstream eugenic movement. Both of these philosophies were based in a dependency discourse that created a negative image of those who were in any way dependent, whether as women in marriages, people with disabilities, or the poor who were dependent on charity and

government assistance. Many women's rights discourses had in common with eugenics philosophy a use of disability rhetoric that employed disability metaphors and notions of "fit" and "unfit" as the basis for determining those worthy of citizenship or rights, whether voting or reproductive. This project does not intend to claim that eugenic feminism was a dominant discourse amongst feminists during the early part of the twentieth century, although Linda Gordon's work has revealed that many feminists were engaging in eugenic tenets in their birth control and family planning work.<sup>266</sup>

What I do argue is that those women and men involved in birth control and family planning efforts, whether black or white, often employed cognitively ableist arguments utilizing eugenic philosophy to support the maternal feminism that had become foundational to their work. And, this eugenic philosophy supported reproductive control over groups of women whose bodies became the fighting grounds for feminists and politicians. I also argue that many women, like Margaret Sanger, may have started out as advocates for poor and working class women, but the political expediency of this position did not benefit their overall work in birth control and family planning activism. It was more politically and socially expedient to shift arguments away from all women's rights to their own bodies toward a platform that embraced population control and capitalized on the ableist fears of black and white men and women. And, rather than support their own women's rights to their bodies, regardless of class or ability, many black advocates of birth control, like W.E.B. DuBois, utilized a corporeally exclusionary narrative that singled out poor and uneducated black women, based on their cognitive and

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266. See L. Gordon *Woman's Body*.

psychological fitness, as the necessary target for birth control among their own population.

Whether the birth control advocates were male or female, black or white, many of the same rhetorical strategies were enacted. Ableism was at the foundation of a eugenic feminist move towards claiming birth control for women. Disability was the marker of the unacceptable body. Women's bodies were the grounds for improving the nation, and able-bodied women were considered the best "incubators" of the future generation. Birth control would allow able-bodied women the option to limit their numbers of children, but it would also keep disabled women from having too many, if any at all. At the heart of most of these reproductive arguments is a negative eugenics that worked towards the elimination of the disabled body.

What Ziegler does not address in her analysis of the contradictions inherent in the joining of feminist and mainstream eugenic philosophies is the fact that eugenic feminism was still, in itself, a conflict with feminist belief of autonomy and rights for all women. The work still supported the idea of "unfit" and "fit" citizens, although the markers of fitness had ceased to be sex/gender based and had more often become based on perceived/assumed ability. Relying on expediency arguments, eugenic feminism still allowed the role of "mother" to be defined and regulated based on the eugenic philosophy of "defect." The category of "unfit," expanded and reinforced through ableist rhetoric developed during this time period, would be able to include any woman who could be classified as disabled physically, cognitively, and/or psychologically.

This construction of the "unfit" woman/mother, perfected by a generation of women and men who were fighting for birth control rights, has remained intact

throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, allowing for women's rights, especially those associated with her body and health, to be attacked over and over again. It will only be through a coalitional politics that recognizes the interlocking, complicated, and often conflicting relationships of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability in women's lives that the notion of "fit" and "unfit" can be dispelled and all women's rights can be honored and enforced.

### **Conclusion: Disability Tropes and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Disability Rights**

For the last four years, I taught for a public middle school in Maryland. As an English and Drama teacher, I had the opportunity to teach students at all levels from sixth – eighth grade. I also had the opportunity to work with some really dedicated teachers. But, the culture within this building was one that de-valued and derided students with learning and developmental disabilities. Adults consistently used the phrase “Sped” to refer not only to the department, classes, and curriculum, but to students as well. Our principals regularly made comments about Special Education teachers – “well, he teaches Special Ed because he’s Special Ed himself,” or “Your short bus will be here shortly. Get on it.” In fact, on my very last day this year, the latter comment was made in front of the entire staff in our end of year meeting. Teachers, following the culture of leadership, lamented their special education students as “really stupid,” “pointless,” “candidates for prison,” and “the future of welfare.”

These attitudes were pervasive, not just among “regular ed” teachers, but were visible and audible among Special Education teachers, particularly. Special Education co-teachers failed to show up to their assigned classes, day after day, and regular education teachers documented every day absent. Calls were made to the compliance hotline. Nothing changed. In fact, administration would pull Special Education teachers from their co-taught classes regularly, to cover other classes or to permanently put them in the front office to answer phones if secretarial staff was absent. This year, my original co-teacher was moved out of my class because I reported him for calling a student “retarded.” When I confronted him, and even the kids told him that “we don’t use that word in this classroom, and shouldn’t use it at all” (my consistent response when anyone

used the word), he became defensive. He said, “I called him that because he is acting like a retard. I’ll call him that if he’s behaving that way.” Needless to say, I was not going to let that go. Once reported, he bad-mouthed me to colleagues (whom I hadn’t even told about the event), and was moved to another classroom. His new co-teacher also reported him for calling a student “a stupid idiot” and for using the word retarded when referring to a student’s behavior. Once again, he lashed out, corralling his like-minded colleagues and that teacher was also ostracized for the remainder of the year, while he was only moved to another classroom. Why was administration’s only response to move him class to class? Why not a formal reprimand. Why not a meeting between the teachers and the co-teacher. Why? Because little value was placed on the position of co-teacher. Why? Because little value was placed on adhering to legal mandates regarding students with disabilities, accommodations, and education.<sup>267</sup> Why? Because little value was placed on the students in those classes.

Speaking out got you nowhere, but ostracized, and frankly, targeted as a trouble-maker. I once asked if people would stop using the term “Sped” in such a demeaning fashion when referring to students and was met with stares and, “Well, that’s what they are, so that’s what we’ll call them.” Multiple teachers lodged complaints about co-teachers failing to show to class, and all were told that it was not their business to judge and that administrative choices were not to be questioned. Then, many of these reporting teachers were either passively treated by administration, and/or received aggressive accusations from Special Education teachers who were “offended” that they had been called out regarding their lack of job performance.

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267. This is not to say that there weren’t good special education teachers in my building. There were three. Three out of ten.

If those very same people who were supposed to have the best interest of students at heart, those administrators who are supposed to work towards equal access to education for all students, and those teachers who should have been challenging the status quo rather than being part of it could or would not address the cultural narrative inherent in the attitudes displayed towards students with cognitive, and, often, psychological disabilities, then how does that narrative reach the other students in the building? How does this type of behavior continue to construct and reinforce the dominant cultural narratives about disability that are already present in our society? When particular students are devalued within a school's cultural and social spectrums, the narrative constructed about those bodies infiltrates the belief systems of not only the teachers within the building, but also the other students in the building, creating a cycle of negative attitudes towards people with disabilities that is rarely challenged.

This clear and dominating narrative in my school building is part of the greater cultural narrative in the United States regarding people with disabilities and the value of those bodies. This cultural narrative has been existence for hundreds of years in the United States. Where has this narrative come from? Why does it remain in twenty first century perceptions regarding disability and disabled bodies? Has it been present in the movements of other rights groups? How has disability been addressed among rights organizations of the past, and how have those rhetors either dispelled or reinforced the cultural narrative of disability which views independence as a marker of value and the disabled body as a foil to independence? This project chose the work of black and white women's rights rhetors from 1832-1932 in order to explore the rhetorics of disability and the resulting cultural narratives created regarding disability and disabled bodies. This

project recognizes that the work of early women's rights advocates is a singular example of the rhetoric that has taken place in the US over the last 250 years, but it argues that it is not uncommon in its use of disability as a rhetorical device to establish people and ideas as worthless, problematic, and/or dangerous.

One might have expected women to be allies of people with disabilities, since many claimed to be working for the rights of all women and were working against arguments that labeled them as physically and intellectually inferior (disabled). But, their early rhetoric worked to exclude women with disabilities from their arguments for rights because of the corporeal exclusionary narratives they constructed in response to their own exclusion from civil, legal, and political rights. Rather than claim natural rights for all women, many early women's rights rhetors claimed they were not disabled and, therefore, could not be discriminated against.<sup>268</sup> This rhetorical strategy, then, allowed for women with disabilities to be discriminated against because they were disabled. This devaluation of the disabled body and experiences took a firm hold in women's rights rhetorics, whether intentional or unintentional, and has continued to pervade cultural narratives within this country, whether it is in social, legal, or political realms, the disabled body has little to no value and any body that cannot claim independence is viewed as worthless, problematic, and/or dangerous to society.

**Rhetorical Conclusions: Rhetoric is an action and rhetoric is intentional.**

Gerard Hauser's assertion that rhetoric is intentional strongly informs this project's analysis of early black and white women's rights advocates and their rhetorical

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268. See Baynton.

choices. According to Hauser, when “one person engages another in an exchange of symbols to accomplish some goal,” that is rhetoric.<sup>269</sup> Early black and white women’s rights advocates used illness and impairment (disability) as a sign/symbol as part of their goal to establish their own rights as women. Their use of disability as a rhetorical tool to establish ideals of womanhood, independence, fitness, and reproductive rights established long-standing narratives regarding disability, the female body and the existence of both.

Hauser’s questions allowed this project to unearth very specific uses of disability within women’s rights rhetoric:

- **Social:** *How is/are disability, or disability-related terms, such as disease, illness, impairment as a symbol, being managed in women’s rights discourses in order to influence people’s perceptions of their situations or realities?*
- **Strategic:** *How is/are disability or disability related terms being used in the rhetoric to help the speaker set goals and frame messages to meet her goals?*
- **Constitutive:** *Or, how is/are disability or disability related terms being used in the rhetoric to create and reinforce an able-bodied reality, a particular world with able-bodied values, ethical standards, norms, etc.?*<sup>270</sup>

In order to tackle these questions, this project engaged Sonja Foss’s process of rhetorical criticism – initially focusing on ideological criticism, but soon realizing that a generic criticism was necessary in order to recognize the patterns of disability rhetoric taking

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269. Hauser 3.

270. Hauser 8-11. Italics are mine as Hauser’s questions have been adapted specifically for this project.

place not only in white women's rhetorical advocacy, but also in the work of black women who were countering the rhetoric of men and white women.

The initial ideological deconstruction assumed the following:

1. Multiple ideologies exist in any culture and have the potential to be manifest in rhetorical artifacts.
2. Hegemony is the privileging of one group's ideologies over another.
3. When an ideology becomes hegemonic, it accumulates "the symbolic power to map or classify the world for others."<sup>271</sup>
4. A dominant ideology controls what participants see as natural or obvious by establishing the norm.
5. A hegemonic ideology provides a sense that things are the way they have to be; it asserts that its meanings are the real, natural ones.<sup>272</sup>

These assumptions allowed the following to be revealed within the work of black and white women in the earliest part of organized women's rights movements. Ableism, as an ideology existed in nineteenth and twentieth century US culture, and is/was manifest in the rhetorical artifacts constructed by women's rights rhetors. Both black and white women used disability to construct their responses to the hegemonic privileging of patriarchy and the corporeal exclusions that men were using to keep female bodies from claiming rights. However, in the process of doing so, they built their own hegemonic barriers for women/people with disabilities, by embracing ableism as a foundation for the corporeal exclusionary narratives they used in order to counter those produced by men.

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271. Stuart Hall as quoted in Foss 210.

272. Foss 210.

Relying on standards of physical, cognitive and psychological fitness to claim rights as women, black and white women not only reinforced the ableism already present in US culture, but constructed new narratives regarding women's bodies and women's fitness and the rights that they should be able to claim. Women's rights discourses, as a result, had "the symbolic power to map or classify the world for others."<sup>273</sup> Those others were the women who could or would never be able to reach the standards that able-bodied black and white women set out not only for womanhood, but citizenship. Their world was mapped by the barriers that were put in place regarding illness, impairment, and disease and the manner in which black and white women denied labels of disability placed upon them by men (and in the case of black women, by white women) and claimed their own rights through the process of excluding disabled bodies as part of expediency arguments that argued for a better society through the exclusion of the unfit.

Ableism, as an ideology, allowed women's rights advocates to tap into already existing beliefs regarding independence and ability and that a disabled body was not natural, and, therefore, not the norm. Through their rhetorical choices, black and white women built a hegemonic ideology among women's rights advocates that established independence as the marker of womanhood and citizenship and while challenging the hegemonic ideology of patriarchy, worked to create a new "ableist" ideal regarding the way things have to be and what meanings were natural or real.

Foss's fourth step in the process of an ideological critique, "identifying the functions served by the ideology (historicizing the function of the ideology for the audience encountering it and its possible consequences in the world)," is what led this

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273. Stuart Hall as quoted in Foss 210.

project towards a genre critique. In order to identify the function served by an ableist ideology, it was necessary to identify the patterns taking place within the rhetoric of multiple women's rights movements.

Each chapter in this project focused on a particular "ideal" within the movements – independence and womanhood, voting and reform for women, and women's reproductive rights. And, each set of ideals allowed the project to reveal patterns of disability use within the rhetoric of black and white women's movements. In order to describe the genre, naming the patterns, this project 1) observed similarities in rhetorical responses to particular situations; 2) collected artifacts that occurred in similar situations; 3) analyzed the artifacts to discover if they shared characteristics; and, 4) formulated the organizing principle of the genre. Gathering texts from anthologies, archives, and manuscript collections at the Library of Congress and the New York Public Libraries' (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), this project located numerous texts produced by women's rights advocates, black and white, men and women, which were written in response to particular situations or arguments being perpetrated by men and other women.

Chapter two, "Autonomy and Ableism: Defining Womanhood," explored the work of black and white women's rights advocates, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, and Maria Miller Stewart and Sojourner Truth. In response to male definitions of woman that focused on their biological inferiority, black and white women produced rhetorical discourses that countered men's claims by claiming physical fitness and intellectual fitness, discarding labels of disability and impairment. While Stanton and Mott focused on physical abilities and their connection to autonomy and independence,

Stewart and Truth had to challenge white women's definitions of womanhood while building their own definitions which relied not only on physical able-bodiedness, but on intellectual ability. In the process of rejecting a disabled status in social and legal realms, black and white women established disability as a foil to independence and autonomy and established a rhetorical pattern that would remain not only in women's rights rhetoric, but as an integral piece of the dominant cultural narratives surrounding disability and disabled bodies. Establishing autonomy and independence as markers of value and fitness would not only reinforce ideologies already present in US society, but would work to construct ableist ideologies within women's rights movements that would linger for centuries to come.

Chapter three, "Voting and Reform: Cognitively Ableist Prescriptions for Citizenship," detailed the responses of both black and white women regarding women's rights to vote and claim citizenship. In response to claims that women were not intellectually fit to vote or be citizens, both black and white women relied on arguments about intellect that would claim rights for some women (educated, middle class), and leave others unable to make the same claims to citizenship because they were not intellectually or psychologically (morally) fit to do so. The rhetorics, at this moment, represented in the work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, multiple female voices in *The Woman's Journal*, Mary Church Terrell and Fannie Barrier Williams, shifted from those that focused on physical and intellectual fitness, to hone in on intellectual fitness, and also worked to include psychological fitness via arguments about morality and decision-making. This ableist rhetoric labeled lower class and foreign bodies as inferior based on cognitive and psychological standards that women argued were necessary in order to

improve society. While white women were focusing on suffrage, specifically, black women were concerned with the elevation of their own race via education and reforms aimed at morality (psychological ability) – both groups of women were arguing that intellectual and psychological standards were necessary in order for women to claim the rights they were arguing for. This pattern worked to support the idea that autonomy and independence were integral for claiming rights. But, the focus shifted from physical autonomy to intellectual and psychological standards that were articulated by middle-class, educated black and white women, leaving the lower classes, labeled as mentally and morally unfit, unable to claim the rights that the advocates were arguing for. This type of disability rhetoric would also remain in women’s rights rhetoric that extend well into the twentieth and twenty first centuries, where cognitive and psychological standards still define who can and cannot be a valuable voice in scholarship and politics, where gender, race, class, and sexuality have been acknowledged as markers of identity but disability is still ignored, regardless of its direct connection to the negative ontologies established regarding gender, race, class, and sexuality throughout history.

Chapter four, “Eugenics and Ableism: Constructing Motherhood,” explored the work of white women - Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Sanger and black women - Addie W. Hunton, Josie B. Hall, as well as multiple black and white voices in *The Birth Control Review* (1914 and 1932). Tackling women’s bodies, reproduction, and fitness for motherhood, both black and white women’s arguments continued to rely on intellectual and psychological fitness as standards for women’s claims to rights. Once again, class divisions reveal tensions between women within the same racial groups, and arguments regarding motherhood and fitness shape the discourses of both black and white

women's groups. There was little rhetorical work that addressed physical fitness directly, but even those arguments that revolved around intellectual and psychological/moral fitness were open to interpretation regarding the physical bodies of the women's being targeted and eliminated as candidates for motherhood. While many women's rights advocates began as proponents for poor women (Sanger), in order to make arguments for freedom of choices for women regarding their bodies and reproduction, rhetorics shifted and poor women became targets of eugenic feminisms in both black and white women's discursive work. Disability was used as part of the rhetoric that black and white women used in order to establish freedoms for some, while chastising and deriding lower classes of women for their failed ability to be responsible as mothers. Arguments regarding morality were steeped in psychological ableism, as well as intellectual ableism. (i.e. an intellectually fit woman would make good decisions; therefore, if a woman made poor choices, sexually, and was deemed immoral, then her intellect and sanity were questioned. Coupling intellectually and psychologically ableist rhetoric allowed for the construction of lower class women as immoral and unfit mothers. This type of rhetoric would continue well into the twentieth century, reemerging again and again in welfare reform and reproductive rights arguments.

Patterns existed within the rhetoric of black and white women's rights discourses. While some patterns remained within each racial group, many were shared across the racial groups. Ideals of womanhood relied not only on physical capability, but on intellect. And, fitness was determined by a person's intellectual and psychological (moral) abilities. In the one hundred years covered by this project, these patterns re-

emerged over and over again in many of the black and white women's rights movements, regardless of their focus on rights acquisition and/or demographic make-up.

Early women's rights advocates are a singular example of the rhetorical choices that have been made in the US, regarding rights arguments for women. Both black and white women had to fight against the corporeally exclusionary narratives that had been constructed in opposition to them, whether by men or other women. Women's bodies were labeled not only as biologically inferior, but intellectually inferior, and reproductively dangerous. This project has unearthed rhetorical choices made by both groups of women which often relied on physical, intellectual and psychological standards in defining and redefining womanhood, as well as constructing ideals of citizenship that revolved around intellectual and psychological fitness. It also determined that both groups of women, while fighting against one set of exclusionary narratives, also built an entirely new set of corporeally exclusionary narratives that argued for the inclusion of women in social, legal, and political realms, but would still continue to exclude many groups of women based on intellectual and psychological standards that were attached to notions of autonomy and independence that were required for citizenship.

### **Lingering Tropes of Disability in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Narratives:**

In the eighty plus years since the work addressed in this project, the tropes identified in this project may have changed based on social and political climates, but they have often intersected with one another to form multiple levels of rhetorical exclusions that have become embedded in our language and culture today. These disability tropes resonate throughout the twentieth and twenty first centuries and evidence

of them can still be found not only in activist rhetoric, but scholarly philosophy and theory, and, perhaps more importantly, in one form or another each of these tropes remains within the cultural lexicon of our perceptions and expectations of/for disabled bodies. For these reasons, we must understand the meaningfulness of disability tropes that were established and/or reinforced over one hundred years for our world. These tropes, because they are not limited to women's rights argumentation, have constructed a world in which people with disabilities are consistently in opposition to

The four tropes articulated in this project remain, in some form or another, within our modern day rhetorics of rights and of ability. One trope appears to dominate in our social, legal and political realms: independence and/or autonomy as a foil to disability. This trope is supported and bolstered by the remaining tropes, but rarely are any of these singular in their usage. Rejecting a disability status, utilizing disability as a scare tactic in an expediency argument, and naming others as disabled in order to garner rights work together with the concept of independence and autonomy to reinforce ideals of citizenship that demand a particular corporeal standard which many people with disabilities cannot meet.

One space in which these narratives remain is the field of education, as evidenced in my anecdote at the beginning of this chapter. Notions of autonomy or independence are antithetical to the intellectual and physical disabilities students may have. Standards of success within the educational field revolve around a student's ability to perform independently or with accommodations. Expectations regarding accommodations set a prescribed level for students that label some as more or less independent than others, and reinforces the trope that independence is a foil to disability. This type of belief system is

also entrenched in the work places that students may enter, work places that are rarely flexible in environmental, social, or professional expectations. Work places where accommodations can be ruled “too extensive,” and people with disabilities may be excluded or denied the opportunity to participate fully in society.

There are a number of significant and powerful examples that I might use in order to demonstrate the continued use of disability tropes within our cultural understandings: the automatic attachment of mental illness to shootings, debates regarding euthanasia for terminally ill patients, intellectual commentary regarding political figures and followers in the 2016 election cycle, abuse and mistreatment of people with disabilities by law enforcement officers, continued access issues for people with disabilities which limit their substantive rights, assumptions of inferiority regarding a disabled parent’s rights, disability-related abortion choices, a lack of disabled bodies in any working portion of our social, political, and legal arenas. In each and every one of these examples disability is seen as less than, as a problem in need of a solution, as a danger, as burden.

Since the inception of this project (2010), I have purposely been acquiring examples from the media (more specifically, stories spreading on FB) of these lingering tropes and the rhetoric that continues to use them. Two types of posts have stood out – the rights of parents with disabilities (2012) and police brutality and violence towards people with disabilities (2014-16). Both of these issues stem from the idea that disability is not only a burden or problem, but is also dangerous and in need of a solution.

In September of 2012, the National Council on Disability published a report, “Rocking the Cradle: Ensuring the Rights of Parents with Disabilities and Their Children.” This report began with a letter addressed to the President of the United States

and continued for over 350 pages to detail the struggles of people with disabilities regarding parental rights. In summary, the report found that:

Even today, 22 years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, parents with disabilities are the only distinct community of Americans who must struggle to retain custody of their children. Removal rates where parents have a psychiatric disability have been found to be as high as 70 percent to 80 percent; where the parent has an intellectual disability, 40 percent to 80 percent. In families where the parental disability is physical, 13 percent have reported discriminatory treatment in custody cases. Parents who are deaf or blind report extremely high rates of child removal and loss of parental rights. Parents with disabilities are more likely to lose custody of their children after divorce. In addition, prospective parents with disabilities have more difficulty when it comes to accessing reproductive health care such as assisted reproductive technologies, and they face significant barriers to adopting children.<sup>274</sup>

Multiple news sources reported on this report, including Time and NPR, and the “APA (American Psychological Association), in collaboration with the NCD (National Council on Disability), the National Association of Social Work and the Child Welfare League, hosted an April 17 congressional briefing to highlight the findings in the NCD’s report.”<sup>275</sup> Parents with disabilities are seen as less than capable of caring for their

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274. “Rocking the Cradle: Ensuring the Rights of Parents with Disabilities and Their Children.” *National Council on Disability*. NCD, 27 September 2012. Web. 1 June 2016.

275. S. Reeves. “Protecting the Rights of Parents with Disabilities.” *American Psychological Association*. July/August 2013. Vol. 44, No. 7. Web. 1 June 2016.

children. Besides the staggering inequality and injustice being perpetrated on parents with disabilities, these numbers also represent a long-standing disability trope – cognitive and psychological disabilities are seen as more dangerous and problematic than physical disabilities. If 70-80% of the cases of parents with psychological disabilities and 40-80% of the cases regarding intellectual disabilities result in children being removed from parents, but a comparative 13% of parents with physical disabilities have claimed discrimination, then the mind is, once again, being privileged over the body. While all of this discrimination is a problem, and is only acceptable because of the cultural narratives regarding disabled bodies, the statistics bear out the reality of the disability tropes regarding rights. Cultural belief systems view the disabled body as antithetical to independence and a disabled parent cannot be independent or fulfill their responsibilities as a parent.

Ella Callow, legal program director, National Center for Parents with Disabilities and their Families, was interviewed on Talk of the Nation (NPR) shortly after the report was released. Her explanation demonstrates the intellectual bias taking place within the legal systems:

CALLOW: [...] There was no abuse, there was no neglect, there was simply speculation that based on their disability and, you know, based on their IQ that they would be unfit to parent at some point, that their disability in and of itself posed a danger to their infant child.

I those are the most troubling types of cases because the people making the decisions often are not terrible well-versed in parenting with a disability. They don't know, for example, that we have 20 years of

research that shows that IQ is not predictive of parenting capacity in and of itself, and yet IQ testing is heavily relied on quite frequently to justify removals.<sup>276</sup>

Even with data demonstrating that these disability tropes are unsubstantiated and far from just or legal, parents with intellectual disabilities are disregarded as fit enough to parent their own children. Rather than set up systems to accommodate and assist people with disabilities in parenting, removing children becomes the standard decision.

Additionally, men and women with disabilities are consistently discriminated against by doctors who do not view them as candidates for parenthood. Beyond the lack of accessible rooms for women in OB/GYN doctor's office; a significant message about how disabled bodies are viewed, doctor's either counsel women with disabilities not to have children of their own, and/or refuse to provide reproductive treatment for women wishing to have children. One example, from Time magazine's "Why Parents with Disabilities are Losing Custody of their Kids" points to the eugenic perspective many doctors still harbor regarding disabled bodies:

Robyn Powell, an attorney at the Council, uses a power wheelchair because the arthrogyrosis that affects her joints and muscles limits the use of her arms and legs. At 31, she doesn't yet have kids. But she hopes she will one day. Yet multiple doctors, aware of her physical impairments, have suggested sterilization. "I have been offered a hysterectomy more times than I can count," says Powell. "It's like they're doing me a favor. I

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276. E. Callow and L. Spears. Interview. "Parents with Disabilities and Family Law." By Neal Cohan. *Talk of the Nation on NPR*. NPR, 27 November 2012. Web. 1 June 2016.

say, I think I'm going to need my uterus. But society as a whole views people with disabilities as incapable of raising kids."<sup>277</sup>

Lack of mobility would be Powell's only limitation, but doctors saw her as an object unworthy of reproduction – as a body type that was undesirable and necessarily in need of elimination via reproductive exclusion.

The National Council on Disability has provided extensive evidence of the continued existence of the disability tropes that were pervasive in early women's rights rhetoric. These patterns of disability rhetoric remain pervasive in cultural narratives of people with disabilities, their value, their abilities, and their rights. Parents with disabilities are seen as foils to independence, which is required in order to claim rights and be a responsible citizen. And, disabled bodies are dangerous to society, in this case, a danger to the child of the parent with the disability. For the safety of the child, whether existing or future, people with disabilities should not parent because they cannot do it responsibly.

Other representations of the disabled body as dangerous have been in relation to police brutality. With the rise in media coverage of police brutality regarding people of color, few media sources have acknowledged that, "Almost half of the people who die at the hands of police have some kind of disability, according to a new report, as officers are often drawn into emergencies where urgent care may be more appropriate than lethal force."<sup>278</sup> Drawing on a study by the Ruderman Family Foundation, authors Ari

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277. B. Rochman. "Why Parents with Disabilities are Losing Custody of their Kids – Laws designed to protect people with disabilities are failing to maintain the rights of disabled parents to take care of their children." *Time*. 27 November 2012. Web. 1 June 2016.

278. A. Melber and M. Hause. "Half of People Killed by Police Have a Disability: Report." *NBC News*. 14 March 2016. Web. 1 June 2016.

Melber and Marti Hause, critique the media's coverage of police cases involving people with disabilities<sup>279</sup>:

Disabled individuals make up a third to half of all people killed by law enforcement officers. Disabled individuals make up the majority of those killed in use-of-force cases that attract widespread attention. This is true both for cases deemed illegal or against policy and for those in which officers are ultimately fully exonerated. The media is ignoring the disability component of these stories, or, worse, is telling them in ways that intensify stigma and ableism.<sup>280</sup>

When we consider the number of people of color who are arrested in our country and factor in that half of them are likely to be disabled, the significance of the misunderstood and devalued body becomes even more dire. As part of their report, Perry and Carter-Long recap a long list of police brutality which took place between 2014-2015, starting with Eric Garner, followed by Michael Brown, Kajieme Powell, Tanesha Anderson, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, and Tamir Rice. But, what Perry and Carter-Long point out is the media's failure to acknowledge the intersectional lives that all of these black people were living:

Unremarked by the vast media coverage of these individuals' lives and death is one important connection: Garner, Powell, Anderson, Gray, and Bland were not just African-Americans; they were disabled African-

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279. D. Perry and L. Carter-Long. "The Ruderman White Paper on Media Coverage of Law Enforcement Use of Force and Disability – a Media Study (2013-2015) and Overview." *Ruderman Family Foundation*. March 2016. Web. 1 June 2016.

280. *Ibid.*

Americans. In fact, roughly a third to a half of all people killed by police are disabled. Many more disabled civilians experience non-lethal violence and abuse at the hands of law enforcement officers.<sup>281</sup>

Whether intentional or unintentional, the missing word in the coverage of each of these events was disability. While focusing on race and stressing the importance of black lives, the media engaged in a rhetorical pattern that devalued the disability experienced by simply ignoring it and failing to acknowledge the role it played in the lives of each of the black persons. Additionally, there also exists the possibility that the families and friends of these victims did not or would not acknowledge their disability because of the stigma already attached to disability in cultural narratives that are constructed and reinforced by the media that fail to acknowledge its existence. Because these events took on such a powerful meaning and played a significant role in the construction of the Black Lives Matter movement, race took the primary role in the coverage of these stories. And, acknowledging the role of disability in the police behaviors and misunderstandings of the victims may have impeded the message of movements that, rightfully, needed and wanted to cry out for social and legal justice for black people.

Perry and Carter-Long also point out the problems that occur when the media does acknowledge disability:

When the media recognizes the presence of disability in an incident, a rare enough event, stories too often describe mental illness or medical disabilities in ways that blame people for their own violent deaths at the hands of law enforcement. When we leave disability out of the

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281. Ibid.

conversation or only consider it as an individual medical problem, two things happen.

First, people with disabilities are more likely to be unjustly harmed by law enforcement.

Second, missing the ways that disability intersects with other factors makes it harder to improve outcomes in any context. When we include disability at the intersection of broader social issues, we come to understand the issues better, and new solutions emerge.<sup>282</sup>

Missing the ways disability intersects with race, gender, and sexuality works to reinforce the disability tropes present in rights arguments and will continue to yield the same results, excluding disabled bodies from protections and rights, if identity politics and rights movements do not shift their rhetoric to acknowledge the significant role that disability plays in the treatment of people of color, male or female, LGBT and/or Q. The media fail to recognize their role in reinforcing the tropes of disability is dangerous and a problem that needs fixed, coupled with disability as a scare tactic. And, this pattern, established so long ago in rights argumentation for and against women, continues to permeate cultural narratives about disability, particularly the scare tactics surrounding “mental illness.” And, denying disability (whether intentionally or unintentionally), the media and/or the families, work to support existing cultural narratives about disability that allow for particular discriminations to continue taking place, and offering no counter-narrative to disrupt the notion that disability is a problem or a danger.

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282. Ibid.

The most public of the cases in which disability is acknowledged and discussed are often connected to psychological disability and gun violence. And, we are all very familiar with those. We can simply google “gun violence and mental health/illness” to see hundreds of results that address multiple sides of the argument regarding gun violence and its correlation to mental health issues. But, disability scholars and activists David Perry and Lawrence Carter-Long point out that psychological disabilities are not the only misunderstood and poorly handled situations in their 2014 *Atlantic* article that:

Encounters with police have also taken an unnecessarily violent turn for people with disabilities that are not psychiatric or intellectual, including conditions that are physical or sensory.<sup>283</sup>

Perry and Carter-Long go on to list a number of situations where people with diabetes were judged as intoxicated, explaining, “Judging by media reports alone, people who are diabetic are often mistaken as threatening or drunk.” Their list also includes examples of deaf people who were treated harshly by police, tasered or beaten because they appeared to be non-compliant. Additionally, other people with cerebral palsy have been arrested for drunk driving and people with epilepsy, having seizures, have been mistreated by police who have beaten and imprisoned them. And, while Perry and Carter-Long’s work is the most comprehensive in regards to the study of media and its representation of disability and police violence, they are not alone in their coverage of these stories.<sup>284</sup>

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283. D. Perry and L. Carter-Long. “How Misunderstanding Disability Leads to Police Violence - Americans with disabilities are victims of violent crimes at nearly three times the rate of their peers.” *The Atlantic*. 6 May 2014. Web. 1 June 2016.

284. P. Dvorak. “Why a man with intellectual disabilities has fewer rights than a convicted felon.” *The Washington Post*. 21 Sept 2015. Web. 1 June 2016; A. Hurst. “Black, autistic, and killed by police.” *Chicago Reader*. 17 Dec 2015. Web. 1 June 2016; T. A. Lewis. “Police Brutality and Deaf People.” *ACLU*. 21 March 2014. Web. 1 June 2016.

## **Disability “Inspiration Porn” – the Strongest Cultural Narrative?**

Beyond the media’s coverage of disability, disabled people, disability rights, and police violence involving people with disabilities, another strong cultural narrative is promulgated by the media – including television and the film industry. This disability narrative is one that claims to champion people with disabilities, but in actuality works to evoke pity in the observer and to reinforce notions of inferiority regarding the disabled body. Cheri Gregg’s article, “South Jersey Man to Graduate Med School Despite Disability,” is, perhaps, the type of coverage that we see most often in the media – the “inspiring” cripple story. This is not the only coverage of this story, as there have been numerous articles and other television news coverage, as well. In fact, I see at least one posting a day in my Facebook feed. People are very inspired by the fact that this young man “overcame” his disability. The simple headline that includes the word “despite” creates a negative assumption that disability is a problem and is expected to stand in the way of independence and success. If one googles disability and inspiration, 148,000 results come up under the news tab, unsurprisingly, most are about people with disabilities who are leading fulfilled lives because they have “overcome” their disability, and are inspiring others around them or people with disabilities tugging on the heart-strings of the non-disabled and eliciting a “my life could be worse” response – both of which are often referred to as “inspiration porn” among disability advocates.

Perhaps the greatest examples of disability “inspiration porn” chock full of disability tropes are films and television shows, two of which are notably conspicuous this year (2016) – *Me Before You* and *Finding Dory*. While some might argue that film

and television are not, technically, rhetoric, I would refer back to Gerard A. Hauser's explanation that rhetoric is not accidental. It is intentional. Its intention is to coordinate social action – the reimagining or reinforcement of cultural values and assumptions. This happens when “one person engages another in an exchange of symbols to accomplish some goal.”<sup>285</sup> One coordinated social action that results from film and television is a reinforcement and/or a reimagining of cultural norms regarding disability and the value of the disabled body – whether it is human or animated. And, its impact is felt on a much greater scale on screens across the country and the world.

*Me Before You* is not supporting any ideas of disability that have not already been covered in previous films, such as *Million Dollar Baby* and *The Sea Inside*, but the disability community has significantly responded on social medias, as well as via protests outside theatres.<sup>286</sup> The lead character, having serious injuries which have led to quadriplegia, follows through with his intentions to die, rather than live with a disability. The advocacy organization, Not Dead Yet UK, argues, “‘Me Before You’ is little more than a disability snuff movie, giving audience the message that if you’re a disabled person, you’re better off dead.”<sup>287</sup> Director, Thea Sharrock, has been quoted as saying, “‘I wanted to stick to the universal theme of the simple and yet wonderful way these people fall in love, while creating a space for people to think about what matters.’” Disability activists argue that the message being sent is that disabled lives don’t “matter.” The film is based on the novel of the same title, which has also been critiqued for its

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285. Hauser 3.

286. See Gilbey, Murthi, and Willmore.

287. D. Nicks. “People Are Calling Out *Me Before You* for Its Portrayal of Disability.” *Time*. 26 May 2016. Web. 1 June 2016.

“tired and damaging disability stereotypes.”<sup>288</sup> Journalist Emily Ladau explains, “The book overflows with dehumanizing stereotypes about disability, from implications that disabled people are things no more active than houseplants, to assumptions that disability is a fate worse than death.”<sup>289</sup> When we look back at the disability tropes present in early women’s rights discourses, we can see that the message regarding disability in *Me Before You* is nothing new, in fact, it is a combination of these tropes: If one cannot be autonomous and self-sufficient, then surely it is better to die. And, the danger of disability is its draining effect not only on society, but particularly on those people who have to deal with the disabled person (care givers). Finally, it is better for a non-disabled person to benefit from the death of a disabled person than for that disabled person to live. Some may argue that this is one film and one perspective. But, it is not one film nor is it one perspective. Time and time again, in film, in literature, in television, in music, disability is represented as something that is undesirable, undervalued, burdensome, and dangerous. Disability, literal or figurative, is utilized in order to demonstrate the value of particular bodies in our society, while stigmatizing those who might be labeled as less than.

Even those cultural products that “get it more right” than others remain problematic in terms of their representation of disability. The reviews of *Finding Dory* are overwhelmingly positive and articulate the fact that the film’s nuanced understandings of disability, disability culture, and the importance of community is fairly

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288. E. Ladau. “Spare me, ‘Me Before You’: Hollywood’s new tearjerker is built on tired and damaging disability stereotypes.” *Salon*. 24 May 2016. Web. 1 June 2016.

289. *Ibid*.

unparalleled in film or television. However, *Finding Dory*, while much better at representing the full spectrum of disability experience than *Finding Nemo*, still finds itself being critiqued by some in the disability community for its representation of particular disabled characters. Dory, as the main character, provides a strong message about the power of disability and its ability to allow disabled bodies to see the world differently and to provide alternative solutions to problems that non-disabled persons would never discover. She is successful because of her disability, not despite her disability. One reviewer particularly sums up the primary message of the film:

The overarching message in “Finding Dory” seems to be that difference should be celebrated and accommodated, in the same way that exceptional talent is. At the film’s onset, Dory announces her memory loss to everyone she meets, often with a tone of profuse apology. But by the end of the film, she stops apologizing and everyone else learns to simply assist her when needed and to patiently give her latitude to challenge herself otherwise. She can’t do it alone, which is another of the film’s big takeaways: A supportive community is essential to the happiness and health of every member. But Dory’s independence — something she finds during her long journey toward home — can and should be encouraged. In this film, it is, to heartwarming results.<sup>290</sup>

It would be easy for me to analyze and critique this reviewer’s language, but I want to focus on one portion of her review – Dory’s independence. Following in the vein of a lingering trope, independence, once again, becomes the marker of a successful journey.

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290. S. L. Brown. “Finding Dory isn’t just about disability – it’s about community and support.” *The Washington Post*. 24 June 2016. Web.

Even as this reviewer points out the necessity of a supportive community and its importance for every member, she still (as many in the viewing audience will) focuses on the independence that Dory achieves. This trope, in particular, is one that holds fast in our cultural ideals regarding the value of bodies. An independent body is one that is valued for its ability to take care of itself and be responsible for itself and not to be a burden to others or to society, as a whole. Was Dory a burden? No, because she could prove herself useful and sufficiently “independent” by the end of the film – “to heartwarming results.” But, what of the other disabled characters in the film? Other critics, including Elizabeth Picciuto, have pointed out the strength of Dory’s representation:

Much more importantly, we see how Dory has taught herself to get around in the world with her disability, such as how to make friends with some and avoid others who lack good will, how to ask for help when she needs it, how to solve problems.<sup>291</sup>

But Picciuto has also pointed out that minor characters with disabilities are still being used for comedic effect (as Dory was in *Finding Nemo*):

The most glaring and frankly offensive character, though, is Gerald the sea lion. He has synophrys (a “unibrow”), an overbite, and somewhat misaligned eyes. He carries everywhere with him a child’s pail, and clearly reads as having an intellectual disability.<sup>292</sup>

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291. E. Picciuto. “Finding Dory, Disability, and Me.” *The Daily Beast*. 19 June 2016. Web.

292. Ibid.

Picciuto goes on to explain that Gerald is bullied by non-disabled sea lions throughout the film, even to the point of stealing the pail that Marlin and Nemo need, but no one ever chastises the non-disabled sea lions for doing so. Additionally, while one critic has proclaimed that Gerald is triumphant in the end, finally able to be on the rock that the other sea lions have bullied him off of, Picciuto points out that the only reason Gerald is finally successful is because the other sea lions have decided to leave the rock.<sup>293</sup> If Gerald is less successful than Dory at navigating his world, is it because his community does not provide him the same support that it does to Dory? If this is the case, why? Is it because he not only has a disability, but visibly appears to be disabled (unlike Dory), and provokes a less positive response among his peers? There are many questions to be asked regarding the representation of disabled characters, not only in this film, but in others. Why are some disabled characters able to be more successful in navigating their world? Could it be that particular disability tropes continue to circulate over time, influencing our perception of disabled bodies, their abilities, and their value?

When the messages that our media sends daily, via fiction or non-fiction, entertainment or news coverage, reiterate and reinforce the tropes that have continued to infiltrate our cultural expectations regarding disability, one can understand how our social, legal, and political systems remain in opposition to people with disabilities. Each of these systems is inextricable from the other, and the rhetoric has embedded itself via legal documents, social expectations, political power, and cultural value. While the media is full of messages of acceptance and “tolerance” regarding the rights of black

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293. A. Wong. “Finding Dory, Disability Culture, and Collective Access.” *Disability Visibility Project*. 27 June 2016. Web.

peoples, immigrants, and the LGBTQ communities, messages of difference are still laced with the disability tropes of the past that continue to devalue and stigmatize disabled bodies because of their failure to be independent and productive in the same way that non-disabled bodies can be.

### **Countering the Dominant Narratives – Ableism and Difference**

So, what it is to be done? How do we move beyond the usage of such tropes in the rhetoric of cultural, social, legal, and political products? Jacques Stiker's call to scholars in the epilogue of his original text, *History of Disability*, is still applicable today, and, I believe, may provide a starting point for American Studies and other interdisciplinary scholarship to begin acknowledging the necessity of Disability Studies and disability perspectives in future scholarship:

Constantly facing this phenomenon [difference], societies have never succeeded in integrating difference *as such*. Either the social group integrates difference in order to make it disappear or integrates partially while excluding certain forms even more, or it excludes radically while paying lip service to a conception of integration [...] It thus seems to me that we must attempt to think an integration *out from* difference.<sup>294</sup>

Stiker challenges his contemporaries claims that this type of work is already being done (in 1982) and claims that it is not. He claims that difference is always coming back to a norm, which supports Fiona Kumari Campbell's assertion that, "It is not possible to have

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294. J. Stiker, *A History of Disability*, Translated by William Sayers (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999) 192.

a concept of difference without ableism.”<sup>295</sup> If, as Stiker claimed, difference either disappears or only partially integrates while causing exclusions, then our current theories of difference and identity are not adequate for addressing any type of difference, particularly the ableism that Kumari Campbell argued correlates with difference.

Thinking “out from” difference, as Stiker proposes, may enable both American Studies and Disability Studies to develop theory and method that would provide a greater analysis and exposure of systems of ableism not only in our institutional structures, but in our ideological perspectives. Stiker challenges our reliance on difference as a mode of analysis or critique even further:

We could, in fact, argue about the concept of difference. After all, we have such a concept in our minds for the simple reason that we have an idea of a norm and of normality. A difference is designated as such only in relation to something from which it differs. This is why I must generalize the concept: there are only differences, as Saussure said of language. Everything is different from everything else. Put another way, we are in a world of singularities. Thus, there are no longer the able and the disabled, just as there is no longer any reason distinct from unreason, imaginary distinct from ideal, body separated from spirit, praxis separated from discourse. [...] difference is never fixed because it is a relationship.”<sup>296</sup>

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295. Kumari Campbell, *Contours* 6.

296. Stiker 192.

While I am aware of the limitations of Structuralist and PostStructuralist Theories (as evidenced in Disability Studies scholarship),<sup>297</sup> Stiker's work points to what may very well be the reason for a resistance in American Studies, whether conscious or unconscious, to travel down a path that includes disabled - bodies, rhetoric, and theory.

Difference is unstable, unfixed, complex, and relative, but difference is still imbued with a negative connotation, which is why disability and ableism, as an ideology, are imbued with an inherently negative ontology.<sup>298</sup> Which is also why the epistemologies of people with disabilities have been devalued and suspect, whether it was a physical knowing, a cognitive knowing, and/or a psychological knowing. I would like to believe that the limits of Structuralism and Post Structuralism, and discourses of difference, are not the reasons for American Studies' resistance to disability, as American Studies is already the home of scholarship that addresses that fluidity of identity categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class – axes of identity that have been constructed via ableist rhetorics that labeled particular bodies as inferior in order to “justify inequality.”<sup>299</sup>

Stiker's call to “think an integration *out from* difference” is one that I have been grappling with for some months now. I believe this may be the task of American Studies, to think “out from” difference. How this is to be done is unclear to me at this point, but I do know that part of this process must be the inclusion of dis/ability as an axis of identity

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297. See S. Tremain, ed, *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

298. Kumari Campbell “Legislating Disability.”

299. See Baynton.

in all American Studies scholarship that interrogates the structures of oppression, as well as the institutionalization of discrimination.

This project, while focusing on the work of women's rights rhetors, does not seek to make yet another call to feminists to acknowledge disability as an integral axis of identity, nor does it simply critique the absence of women with disabilities in feminist scholarship/history. It does, however, work to understand how feminist discourses have contributed to the continued struggle of people with disabilities in realizing the very same rights that feminists have been trying to claim for "all." If we acknowledge the role that the earliest US black and white women's rights movements have played in constructing definitions of not only womanhood, but motherhood, over the last 160 years in our country, we must also acknowledge that our contemporary social climate regarding women's reproductive rights is, in part, a result of the work that has been done in the past. Whether it was the long battle for voting rights, the social reform work of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the family planning movement spearheaded by Margaret Sanger, or Welfare Reform arguments of the 1980s and 90s, each of these discourses within the US women's movements has worked to advocate for women's rights as women, and primarily, women's rights as mothers. And each has been critiqued for its failure to recognize the vast "differences" in women's lived experiences. A new feminist disability perspective would allow an interrogation of women's rights discourses through the lens of disability and could result in a clearer understanding of how women's rights discourses over the last two centuries have impacted the rights of women with disabilities.

This project also works to create an understanding of the power of rhetoric within any scholarship to construct acceptable and unacceptable bodies. And, that this rhetoric is not static or limited in terms of its usage. The rhetorical structures and tropes that have been utilized in social, legal, and political realms have also been relied upon in terms of the cultural products that are created for our consumption. All of these systems work together to construct definitions not only of womanhood, race, sexuality, and religion, but more importantly, in this project, disability and the disabled body.

Questions that I am left with, and which may provide a starting point for future work, are as follow:

- What traces of ableist rhetoric involving independence and expediency arguments can be found in disability policy and legislation?
- How might disability as a negative ontology have impacted the disability rights movement, particularly in regards to the substantive rights of disabled women?
- In what ways do the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1991 and 2008) reconstruct and reinforce the same ableist rhetorics present in prior Civil Rights legislation that ignored people with disabilities?
- Can disability policy or legislation modeled on previous civil rights work (race, gender, sexuality) ever be an adequate source of protection for people with disabilities?
  - o In what ways are the experiences of disabled people different from other minority groups?
  - o How does this impact the type of legislation, policy, and enforcement that must be put into place regarding these bodies?

- How might a critical feminist disability perspective in the women's movement allow for a greater and more nuanced understanding of the exclusions and tensions in the women's movements of the twentieth and twenty first centuries?
- Can Stiker's call to think "out from" difference and Kumari Campbell's "no difference without ableism" arguments provide a starting point for a new theoretical and methodological approach to American Studies?

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