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**MATERIAL EMBODIMENTS, QUEER VISUALITIES:  
PRESENTING DISABILITY IN AMERICAN PUBLIC HISTORY**

By

**Andrew B. Marcum**

B.S., English, Troy University, 2001  
M.A., American Studies, University of Alabama, 2005

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy  
American Studies**

The University of New Mexico  
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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents Dan and Ann. Your love and support have made all I have and will achieve possible. I also dedicate this to my brothers Christopher and James and to the memory of our beloved sister Anna. You have all inspired and sustained me and I hope this makes you proud.

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines the presentation of disability at three of the most popular sites for the consumption of public history in the United States including the U.S. Capitol, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. I de-construct the cultural and historical narratives and discourses of disability circulating at these sites and offer a visual culture analysis of the images, artifacts, and statuary found at each of them. My study is informed principally by the theories and methods of queer disability studies, visual culture studies, and cultural studies critiques of neoliberalism. I consider how questions of identity, inequality, and power raised by the Disability Rights Movement interact with modes of representation and practices of public history to produce cultural and historical knowledge about physical and cognitive difference. I contend that heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality have structured both the history of people with disabilities and the contemporary presentation of that history for public audiences. Accordingly, I argue that the history of disability in the United States should not be conceptualized or represented solely in terms of political efforts to achieve equal rights and inclusion for those with disabilities. Nor, I contend, should we understand

the movement for disability rights in America primarily as a social struggle that has transformed architectural and “attitudinal” barriers. Rather, I propose that the history of people with disabilities in the U.S. must also be understood, explored, and presented, as a history of resistance to, and struggle against, the able-bodied, raced, classed, gendered, and sexed terms of disabled people’s inclusion in, and exclusion from, American society. Interpreting U.S. disability history in this way not only permits us to expose and challenge the normative cultural construction and deployment of disability in American life, but also, allows to develop histories of disability not grounded in nondisabled standards, norms, and expectations, of disability and not dependent on the able-bodied status of audiences.



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## **Introduction**

### **Overview**

This dissertation examines the presentation of disability at three popular sites for the consumption of public history in the United States including the U.S. Capitol, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. I deconstruct the cultural and historical narratives and discourses of disability circulating at these sites and offer a visual culture analysis of the images, artifacts, and statuary found at each of them. Informed principally by the theories and methods of queer disability studies, visual culture studies, and culture studies critiques of neoliberalism, my examination of contemporary public histories of disability demonstrates how people with disabilities have been culturally and historically imagined, represented, and demarcated over and against heteronormative and able-bodied standards and expectations.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, I argue that the history of disability in the United States should not be conceptualized or represented solely in terms of political efforts to achieve equal rights and inclusion for those with disabilities. Nor, I contend, should we understand the movement for disability rights in America primarily as a social struggle that has transformed architectural and "attitudinal" barriers. Rather, I propose that the history of people with disabilities in the U.S. must also be understood, explored, and presented, as a history of resistance to, and struggle against, the able-bodied and heteronormative terms of disabled people's inclusion in, and exclusion from, American society.

Interpreting the political, social and cultural history of disability in this way, I conclude, allows us to reveal and cultivate cultural and historical knowledges of disability that move beyond merely defying negative cultural stereotypes or working to correct the

historical record around disability. Instead, the non-normative crip/queer histories, readings, and perspectives of disability I attempt to locate in this project challenge us to consider how disability is an inherently *political* social and cultural construction attached to normative and normalizing constructs of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability—as well as to notions of social, aesthetic, and economic value—that influence dominant understandings and perceptions of who and what counts as “American.” It is not only that the experiences of people with disabilities—including their level of access to resources, knowledge, housing, social inclusion, and economic opportunities—continue to be shaped by dynamics of race, class, gender, sexuality and variances in type, scope, and scale of “disability.” It is also that, despite these variances, cultural narratives and historical representations of disability in the United States frequently present disability in ways that privilege, reify, and reproduce white, male, middle and upper class, heteronormative and able-bodied standards, norms, and expectations of what constitutes a valued and successful life. Histories, representations, and cultural narratives of disability that expose the ways in which disability frequently defies, complicates, bewilders, and de-naturalizes these dominant notions of what counts as “normal,” “productive,” “healthy,” and desirable thus allow us to interrogate, and render transparent, the social, cultural, and historical production of “disability” in the United States in ways that confront and confound, rather than replicate and concretize, nondisabled, heteropatriarchal capitalist framings of disability as an affliction to be corrected through medical or technological intervention, a tragic departure from the “normal” to be heroically endured or triumphantly overcome, or an inspirational lesson in what is possible for “everybody” in the United States of America.

The fascinating public debate over whether or not to present FDR in his wheelchair at the national memorial to his presidency that I take up in chapter 2 illustrates this point and demonstrates the value of histories of disability that help us to fundamentally call into question, rather than reinstate in more “positive” vocabularies, the nondisabled normative cultural assumptions and knowledges about disability that continue to justify the exclusion and degradation of people with disabilities. The controversy surrounding the FDR Memorial revealed how highly-gendered, heteronormative, and able-bodied expectations of disability worked to construe the visual and material presence of a wheelchair within the memorial as a threat to Roosevelt’s masculine, able-bodied authority in history. Addressing this perceived danger to nondisabled heteronormative clout in history, activists and their supporters in congress, and the national media, successfully advocated for the wheelchair statue addition in terms that often replicated—even as they attempted to counter—the ablest assumptions and prejudices of those adamantly opposed to explicitly portraying Roosevelt’s disability. By emphasizing Roosevelt’s normality and able-bodiedness—including his “strength,” “character,” “courage,” and “unmatched ability”—many leading supporters of the wheelchair statue addition verified the notion that disability is a personal struggle to be overcome through individual effort rather than a set of social, cultural, and political conditions to be addressed through collective action.

The statue of Roosevelt in wheelchair was also presented as an inspirational lesson that offered “proof” that anyone could overcome circumstances to become great; a notion that continues to justify pervasive inequality and social injustice for those with disabilities as well as other marginalized groups by suggesting that a failure to become great is, in a phrase, “your own damn fault.” Thus, rather than presenting a social history of Roosevelt’s paralysis

and wheelchair use that might have challenged the anti-New Deal neoliberal ethos of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the wheelchair statue debate often casts Roosevelt as the material and historical embodiment of what queer disability studies scholar and early practitioner of crip theory Robert McRuer calls “nondisabled liberalism.” This kind of liberalism, McRuer explains, can only understand disabled people in able-bodied and heteronormative terms.<sup>2</sup>

In choosing to focus on the normalizing and regulatory work done by the FDR Memorial debate and statue, I do not mean to diminish or discount the value and significance of the work done by activists to influence the design of the memorial in order to secure a more accurate and powerful historical depiction of Roosevelt’s profound post-polio paralysis. Indeed, I believe the statue represents an important corrective to dominant hagiographies of U.S. historical figures as always already able-bodied. Nor do I wish to foreclose possible counter-hegemonic readings of the statue by suggesting that it presents a unilateral or monolithic nondisabled story of Roosevelt’s paralysis. A central tenant of visual culture studies is that the meanings produced by cultural representations are not constituted exclusively within those representations but are derived, instead, from the relationship between the viewer and the particular cultural production or representation that is being viewed.

Furthermore, the statue’s nonvisual, tactile quality—as well as its unprecedented human scale and unusual popularity with visitors—clearly suggest that it succeeds as a work of public history that makes possible multiple interpretations and encounters. At the same time, however, because representations of disability for public audiences do not merely reflect, but construct, identities and narratives of national belonging, attention must be paid to how the statue and its discourses labor to foreclose certain non-normative, non-able-bodied,

knowledges and histories of disability. This is not only so that we may critique the exclusions and occlusions of knowledge that come with such rhetorical foreclosures, but also, so that we may begin to formulate histories of disability that offer new knowledges of disability rather than repeating and naturalizing existing, past, and often oppressive, knowledges.

Viewing histories of disability for public consumption through a crip/queer lens thus not only exposes the heteronormative assumptions at the core of many conventional cultural and historical narratives of disability, but also, demonstrates how the insights of crip theory and queer disability studies can combine with the practices of visual culture studies to produce public histories of disability that disrupt and oppose the authority of visual culture itself to define and regulate disabled people in normalizing terms while also promoting ways of understanding, seeing, thinking, and talking about disability not grounded in ableist perspectives or sutured to nondisabled forms of knowledge reception. A statue of Helen Keller recently donated to the U.S. Capitol's Statuary Hall Collection that I examine in Chapter 1, for instance, at once reifies able-bodied and heterosexual norms of sex, gender, and ability and offers an opportunity to confront and critically query the manufacturing, deployment, and naturalization of those standards. As a visual representation and material embodiment, the Keller statue is a profoundly normalizing cultural production that argues for the erasure of disability in history and contends that heteronormative standards and gendered expectations of beauty and ability are the only national values and ideals fit for public consumption. However, as a nonvisual, tactile representation and a site of anti-capitalist, feminist, and queer and disabled cultural critique, the Keller statue also offers up non-normative histories and narratives of Keller's life that are not contingent upon the able-bodied or "seeing" status of audience members and not tethered to nondisabled and



normalizing celebratory liberal histories of disability as a difference to be assimilated to the needs and norms of contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

In addition to arguing that crip/queer methods and theories of disability can challenge dominant cultural and historical knowledge about disability while producing new counter-hegemonic knowledges of disability, I contend that crip/queer histories of disability complement and extend important efforts in disability studies to focus attention on the body as a location of social regulation and political struggle. I am not just concerned here with the political and cultural work done by contemporary material embodiments of figures like Franklin Roosevelt and Helen Keller, but also, with the material embodiments, lives, struggles, and perspectives of disabled people past and present that are obscured by, and through, these fabricated bodies. Putting historical and material bodies at the center of the frame allows us to attend to the specific ways in which some bodies are deemed valued and privileged while others are cast as devalued and disposable. Throughout American history those bodies labeled “defective” have been institutionalized, sterilized, euthanized, deported, or barred from entering the country. The category of “defective” has thus not only included those with disabilities but also those with “suspect” racial, ethnic, or religious affiliations, poor people, immigrants from the wrong countries, and sexual “delinquents.”<sup>3</sup>

This means that the construction of disability in the United States has been a fundamentally racialized, classed, gendered, and sexed political and cultural endeavor designed to define, and violently enforce, dominant ideas about which bodies count as “healthy” and “normal” and which bodies represent a “threat” to a hygienic white racial heteronormative past, present, and future order. Public histories of disability that eschew this reality by offering histories and universalizing narratives of eventual equality and inclusion

for “all” thus leave intact, or reify and naturalize, the vicious normativities that have shaped, and continue to shape, who is included in “all” and who is not. In this way, universalizing histories of progress that appeal to a particular group, nation, or community of people imagined to share a past also erase histories and knowledges of struggle not captured by the histories and knowledges of what Rosemarie Garland Thomson has famously dubbed the “normate” majority.

In the United States, the “universal,” “normal,” subject of American history and culture is always already presumed to be white, usually male, middle or upper class, always heterosexual, and, crucially, always able-bodied. Critiquing the exclusions of citizenship from a disability perspective, Thomson explains that the “American Ideal” imagines and insists that all “citizens” possess the capacity for economic self-sufficiency as well as “self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress.”<sup>4</sup> All of these notions are profoundly threatened by disability and all have historically worked to exclude from the national body any persons or groups deemed incapable of achieving “self-determination,” “autonomy,” or “progress” including, of course, those with disabilities. In this context, “the normate” (read: white, male, able-bodied, heteronormative “enlightened” subject) is positioned as the embodiment of the “nation” and its normative values. White, able-bodied heteronormative bodies thus become the bodies at the center of American history and culture.

Attention to particular bodies, and the histories they reveal and/or foreclose, allows us to expose the construction of the able-bodied “normate” as well as to uncover the political and cultural work done by the “normate” to exclude and marginalize bodily difference. Importantly, such a focus also reveals how people with disabilities have been excluded and marginalized precisely because their bodies have not met certain architectural, educational,

cultural, legal, or social expectations of how bodies should look and perform. Put simply, when we ignore the particularities and histories of the body, we leave unquestioned and unchallenged the mythical nondisabled “normate” body presumed to animate and define all of American history and culture and, so doing, foreclose radical crip and queer histories and knowledges.

Positioning disability oppression and marginalization in the social realm, rather than in the physical and biological domain of the body itself, has doubtless been essential to challenging able-bodied tyranny and disability devaluation. This has, without question, served the disability rights movement well. But, challenging the systematic degradation of disabled people has also clearly entailed the recognition that particular bodies have been the focus of regulation and normative violence. This means that, for many disabled people, including activist and scholars of disability, the body has also become a site for claiming one’s “disabled” body as a place of resistance, a locale for calling out, calling into question, and radically re-thinking, the social, political, cultural, and spatial environments that naturalize “able-bodiedness” while viewing the disabled body as “unnatural” and repulsive. As crip/queer poet and activist Eli Clare observes:

It has been powerful for marginalized people, including disabled people, to say “Leave our bodies alone. Stop justifying and explaining your oppressive crap by measuring, comparing, judging, blaming, creating theories about our bodies.” But at the same time, we must not forget that our bodies are still part of the equation, that paired with the external forces of oppression are the incredibly internal, body-centered experiences of who we are and how we live with oppression.<sup>5</sup>

For Clare, the point is not to identify a specific disabled body or type of bodies that exemplify the “disability experience” or that reveal certain cultural, political, social, or theoretical “truths” written on different bodies. The point, rather, is to hone in on the body so

as to expose how the embodied experiences of people with disabilities at once controvert nondisabled perceptions of disability, and reveal how able-bodied understandings of disability consistently work to maintain structures of disability oppression and exclusion. A focus on the body thus shows how the normative regulation of disability works and demonstrates how the social, cultural, and political construction of the disabled body is key to its containment within, and/or exile from, dominant heteronormative American society.

Preeminent queer theorist Judith Butler clarifies and furthers the implications of Clare's analysis by insisting that "It is important to resist that theoretical gesture of pathos in which exclusions are simply affirmed as sad necessities of signification. The task is to refigure this necessary "outside" as a future horizon, one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome."<sup>6</sup> In other words, Eli Clare's call to retrieve queer and disabled bodies "stolen" and pressed into service by an ableist, heteronormative symbolic and material order should not be disclaimed are discredited as merely an essentialist maneuver that necessarily instantiates an idealized disabled body at the expense of other bodies. Instead, we should seize upon the "matter" of the body and its multiplicity of material forms as an opportunity to continually uncover and confound the normative construction and reification of the body and the regulatory and material effects that flow from that.

To that end, in chapter 3, I present a crip/queer analysis of two recent disability history exhibition's at the Smithsonian Institution. My examination of the 2000 Disability Rights Movement and 2013 Everybody exhibitions at the National Museum of American History focuses on how the visual and material embodiments of disability in these exhibits conjure a history of heteronormative regulation of disability in the United States as well as a

history of resistance to that regulation by people with disabilities. Using the artifacts and images of these exhibitions as my primary sources, I illustrate how the disability rights movement was not simply a liberal progressive movement intended to demonstrate the “fitness” of disabled people for citizenship and inclusion in American society. Rather, the disability movement also possessed, and continues to possess, a more radical edge that is about challenging the nondisabled and heteronormative, “normate,” notions of “citizenship” and national belonging that work to disavow disability and foreground able-bodiedness as a prerequisite for rights and inclusion. I expose the limits of, and exclusions produced by, framing the history of disability as civil rights struggle and also uncover non-heteronormative histories of disability in these exhibitions that advance an anti-capitalist ethic of interdependency and difference that challenges the cherished cultural fictions of able-bodiedness, individualism, and independence that excuse and perpetuate on-going social and economic inequality for people with disabilities.

In taking contemporary public history seriously as a site for cultural and political contestation around disability, I thus aim to show how non-normative “crip/queer” readings of histories and representations of disability in America’s past defy and de-normalize present understandings of disability in ways that help to make possible what crip and queer disability theorist Allison Kafer calls “a future for crips” that is not shaped exclusively by the for profit interest of the medical and biotech industries nor imagined and formed through able-bodied and heteronormative fears and projections of disability and difference as something to be shunned, shamed, cosmetically erased, genetically-eliminated, or otherwise laudably surpassed. In this way, I am not proposing a crip futurity that posits disability’s eventual inclusion into a “more perfect union.” On the contrary, I, like Kafer, understand that a “future

for crips” means maintaining and propelling a forceful critique of able-bodied heteronormative futurity premised on the erasure of those with disabilities while also advancing a critical assessment of queer studies critiques of futurity premised on the negation of a future that is presumed to be always already heteronormative and nondisabled. As Kafer bluntly and boldly asserts, “ ‘Fucking the future’ takes on a different valence for those who are *not* supported in their desires to project themselves (and their children) into the future in the first place.”<sup>7</sup>

I hold to the belief, then, that public histories, and the cultural and historical representations of disability they advance, can make a difference for people with disabilities by confronting the “common sense” assumptions about disability that circumscribe and undergird disability oppression, suppression, and exclusion. It is not that creating more “positive” representational or narrative histories of disability will make conditions for people with disabilities better or less “negative.” I mean to argue quite the reverse in fact. As the Keller and Roosevelt examples suggest, “positive” histories of disability often serve merely to bolster the normative, exclusionary, and debilitating status quo for people with disabilities by glossing over the social, cultural, political, and economic structures that facilitate and perpetuate marginalization for those least able to conform to nondisabled heteronormative standards while extending privileges and access to those who are most successful at meeting these standards.

Nor is it that disability or persons with disabilities have been erased outright from U.S. culture and history and therefore need to be “recovered” as part of “our” national heritage. Indeed, as historian Douglas Baynton and many others in disability studies have consistently revealed, disability is literally “everywhere” in American history and culture.

What is needed then, is not an excavation of disability in history, but rather, an explication of the political and cultural work done by disability in history.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, instead of advocating for the rescue or validation of disability in history, I argue for histories of disability that interrogate the social, cultural, and historical production of “positive” and “negative” bodies and suggest that such histories can help us to imagine, establish, and work to sustain conditions of possibility for people with disabilities not premised on their capacity to measure up to hegemonic, culturally-ascribed fictions of “able-bodied” superiority and value.

In the remainder of this introduction, I specify my methodological and theoretical approaches to this project and discuss its significance as a scholarly effort that endeavors to establish connections between, and make an original contribution to, the fields of American Studies, visual culture studies, queer disability studies, and public history. I begin by situating my project in the field of queer disability studies. I explain how my project draws upon the methods and theories of this field, define the meaning and significance of “crip/queer” analysis, and specify how, as a queer disability studies project, my dissertation seeks to intervene in, and add to, disability studies and queer studies. I also discuss how critiques of neoliberalism are critical to my understanding of the historical and contemporary import of disability as a radical framework from which to understand and challenge processes of social and economic inequality.

Following my discussion of queer disability studies and its “crip” methods, I offer a brief consideration of how visibility and questions of representation have been central to the field of disability studies and show how I use both visual culture analysis and de-constructive discursive analysis in this dissertation. I underscore again my crip/queer take on questions of representation and visibility, articulate how disability studies and visual culture studies can

add to and complicate one another, and insists that the visual field must be recognized and contested as a domain for the production of normative identities of disability. Next, I briefly consider public history as an important contemporary arena of knowledge production about disability that, in many ways, presents an ideal archive from which to practice “cripping” American history and culture. I then move to summarize this significance of this project, reviewing its value as a crip/queer work and specifying its particular importance to American Studies. Finally, I complete this introduction with a concise but detailed description of the various archives I analyze—and the particular arguments I make that are unique to each of my three chapters. My aim is to achieve transparency for the reader about the methods I am using, the arguments I am making, and the bodies of knowledge and scholarship that have inspired and underwritten this work.

### **Crip Theory**

Robert McRuer opens the first chapter of his pioneering work *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* with a photograph of an odd material artifact now featured in the Smithsonian Institution exhibition *Everybody: An Artifact History of Disability in America*. The photo captures a piece of a do-it-yourself curb cut dislodged by sledgehammer-wielding disability activists. McRuer explains that the stone-like object emblemizes the praxis of what he dubs “crip theory.” As McRuer explains, crip theory has not only to do with “how bodies and disabilities have been conceived and materialized in multiple cultural locations, and how they might be understood and imagined as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization,” but also with “self-identified crips in the street—taking sledgehammers to inaccessible curbs, chaining wheelchairs together in circles around buses or subway stations, demanding community-based services and facilities for



independent and interdependent living.”<sup>8</sup> Building on the work of queer and disabled scholar and performance artist Carrie Sandahl, McRuer contends that crip theory emerges not only—or even predominately—from the halls of academia, but from crip artists, activists, and cultural producers outside the academia.

Sandahl and McRuer both understand cultural productions and practices of representation and re-representation that challenge normative assumptions as key forms of activism and analysis foundational to crip theory and praxis. In taking up the term “crip” Sandahl notes, for instance, that crips and queers reject passing as either straight or nondisabled and, instead, “appropriate and rearticulate labels the mainstream once used to silence and humiliate them and that the liberal factions of their subcultures would like to suppress.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, observes Sandahl, “Queering describes the practices of putting a spin on mainstream representations to reveal latent queer subtexts; of appropriating a representation for one’s own purposes, forcing it to signify differently; or of de-constructing a representation’s heterosexism.”<sup>10</sup> Sandahl understands “cripping” as mode of “queering” that not only places disability at its center, but also, understands “compulsory heterosexuality” and compulsory “able-bodiedness” to be mutually constituted norms that need to be radically questioned and culturally de-constructed, de-centered, and critiqued.

My own project is, in all of these ways, is very much a scholarly endeavor in “cripping” normative histories of disability. I “crip” disability histories for public audiences precisely in order to reveal “latent queer subtexts,” compel historical representations of disability to “signify differently,” and expose the “heterosexism” embedded in popular histories and narratives of disability for public consumption. Like McRuer, I am very much interested in “how bodies and disabilities have been conceived and materialized in multiple

cultural locations [in this case public history] and how they might be understood and imagined as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization.” And, like McRuer and Sandahl, I understand queer and disabled cultural productions and counter-narratives of disability to be an essential part of “resistance to homogenization.” I also join Sandahl and McRuer in understanding such resistance as fundamentally political, involving not just cultural critique, but also, acting on the new forms of knowledge that flow from such critique.

A core contribution of disability studies has been to specify how disability entails its own history, culture, and community and therefore possesses its own cultural critiques and counter-hegemonic knowledges as well as its own complicated, messy, and contested investments in challenging and refiguring the normative identities assigned to it. In this sense, crippling should not be understood as simply queering by another name. It is a praxis with its own investments and interventions. As such, it does not merely complement queer theory but, in so doing, it productively complicates it as well. As founding scholars in the field of queer disability studies, both Sandahl and McRuer understand “crip” as talking back to, and in conversation with, the fields of disability studies and queer studies. Indeed, a primary objective of queer disability studies is to investigate how disability studies and queer theory productively overlap, conflict, and inform one another.

Sandahl begins her groundbreaking essay on queer and disabled autobiographical performance with a useful explication of the intellectual, ideological, and historical continuities that exists between queer theory and disability studies. Both fields originated in, and maintain commitments to, political activism on behalf of diverse, sometimes shared, constituencies and subcultures. But, Sandahl elaborates,

Perhaps the most significant similarity between these disciplines however, is their radical stance towards concepts of normalcy; both argue adamantly against the compulsion to observe norms of all kinds (corporeal, mental, sexual, social, cultural, subcultural etc.). This stance may even be considered their *raison d'être*, since both emerged from critiques levied against the normalizing tendencies of their antecedents. Queer theorists critiqued feminist, gay, lesbian, and even gender studies for excluding various sexual constituents (transsexuals, bisexuals, transgendered people, S/M practitioners, non-heteronormative straights etc.) and for advocating inclusion and representation in, rather than replacement of, existing social structures. Disability studies critiqued the fact that disability had long been relegated to academic disciplines (primarily medicine, social sciences, and social services) that considered disabilities “problems” to be cured and the disabled “defectives” to be normalized, not a minority group with its own politics, culture, and history.<sup>11</sup>

As the closing lines of Sandahl’s summation might suggest, one of the most important ways that queer theory challenges disability studies is with its thorough critique and deep-seated skepticism of “advocating for inclusion and representation in, rather than replacement of, existing social structures.” Indeed, one of the underlying reasons for my own effort to “crip” disability histories is to argue for, and to take up, the radical queer call to reject inclusion and assimilation in favor of more radical and systemic change. I do so from a crip perspective that understands “inclusion” in an able-bodied world to be necessarily exclusionary, normative, and damaging.

As Michael Warner’s analysis of mainstream gay and lesbian politics and history has shown, for example, appeals for inclusion in the existing social order made by marginalized people on the basis of their “sameness” with the dominant (i.e., heterosexual and nondisabled) majority not only inevitably exclude those who are not, in fact, “the same,” but also, replicate and reify the stigmatization of difference that produces marginalization in the first place by establishing an “inside” group of “good” normative minorities who want to be, or can be, “like everyone else” and an “outside” group of “bad” non-normative queer

minorities. The exclusionary and oppressive logics of the existing order are thus re-enforced and solidified rather than challenge or transformed.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, as queer disability studies scholar Ellen Samuels (building on the innovative work Eve Sedgwick) has shown, uncritical appeals to “come out” as disabled or forge a unified disability identity in the name of political action also produce exclusionary and profoundly regulatory norms. It is not just that folks with nonvisible disabilities tend to be excluded from a “disability” community premised on visibility, it is that, in order to participate in that community, one must constantly “come out” as disabled, be identified as such, and submit to the processes of interrogation, inspection, and regulation that that entails. Lisa Walker further elaborates on the implications of this when she observes: “The impulse to privilege the visible often arises out of need to reclaim signifiers of difference which dominant ideologies have used to define minority identities negatively. But while this strategy of reclamation is often affirming, it can also replicate the practices of dominant ideologies which use visibility to create social categories on the basis of exclusion.”<sup>13</sup> One of the things that queer studies can do for disability studies then, as well as for the disability movement, is to compel an understanding of the limits of visibility as a political and cultural strategy while also helping to produce new strategies premised on disability’s multiplicity of differences rather than its “sameness.” McRuer and Sandahl’s work recognizes this by stressing that “crip” is not about the uncritical adoption and deployment of a defined “crip” identity. Rather, criping is concerned with continually and critically de-constructing, critiquing, re-signifying, and questioning again, identities as they are made and deployed in cultural, historical, political, social, spatial, legal, and material realms. In addition, if, as I have suggested, a focus on the body and embodiment has been, and remains, crucial to both

disability studies and queer disability studies, then critical attention to how a politics focused on the body might preclude certain bodies that do not necessarily signal their physical, cognitive, or sensory difference is critical to avoid replicating exclusions.

At the same time, however, as Carrie Sandahl makes clear, disability studies has much to offer queer theory. Sandahl insists that disability is a unique and crucial category of analysis from which to de-construct and critique normativity that queer studies should take more seriously. A central tenant of queer disability studies is that disability is configured through queerness since it is always already seen as outside of the heterosexual norm. Sandahl argues that queer theory thus cannot afford to ignore disability since, to do so, would undermine its own commitments to challenging both normativity and sexual regulation. Sandahl joins Michael Warner in insisting that both crip and queer derive their power from an ability to not only recognize and be attentive to differences, but also, to resist the normalizing categorizations that often attach to difference.<sup>14</sup>

Robert McRuer offers a related but slightly more critical assessment of the need to “crip” queer theory. McRuer argues, for instance, that “most left movements, including queer movements,” cannot conceive of the idea that a disabled world is both possible and desirable because these movements are frequently “tied to liberationist models that need disability as the raw material against which the imagined future world is formed.” That need, McRuer observes, “is arguably legible everywhere—in simple theses such as ‘neoliberalism disables dissent’ or, more seriously, in [The World Social Forum’s] resistance to giving disabled people a voice.”<sup>15</sup>

In other words, whereas Sandhal insists that disability should be seen as indispensable to the de-normalizing, anti-heteronormative project of queer theory, McRuer sees disability

as a necessary prerequisite for pursuing the queer commitment to social and economic justice and radical social change. My own project demonstrates the value of both of these crip interventions into queer theory. I consistently show how cultural representations of disability seek to naturalize and reproduce able-bodiedness and heterosexuality as the norm against which disability is defined. I also outline the political import of bringing disability to bear on queer theory, and queer theory to bear on disability, that McRuer suggests. In chapter 2, for instance, I show how investments in normative “inclusion” and national belonging for disabled people short-circuit a radical history of FDR’s wheelchair use. In Chapter 3, I take up Allison Kafer’s crip critique of queer studies’ negation of futurity in order to show how accounting for disability, and the disabled body, is crucial to any project seeking social justice or radical change. I also illustrate how a politics of disability interdependency counters disability’s abjection from the dominant cultural and economic order. In so doing, I demonstrate how disability forces queer studies to reckon with the politics of recent trends in queer studies aimed at rejecting futurity in favor a strategic embrace of “queer” abjection that, I argue, does not address the very real disposal of dejected bodies under neoliberalism.

Throughout this dissertation, I accept Abby L. Wilkerson and Robert McRuer’s call to understand “crip theory” and queer disability studies as an important challenge to neoliberalism. I draw inspiration from, and frequently cite, scholarly critiques of neoliberalism from queer studies scholars such as Lisa Duggan, who details the dismantling of FDR’s New Deal, and Lauren Berlant, who reveals how and why sites like the FDR Memorial forge struggles over national belonging. In addition, I bring in Paul Longmore’s staunch critique of privatization to show, not only how neoliberal policies directly influence the quality of life for people with disabilities, but also, how neoliberal ideologies and policies

are shaped significantly by the cultural biases that surround disability. In so doing, I show how a disability analysis compliments and extends the work of scholars such as Duggan and Berlant and demonstrate how disability issues such as debates over assisted-suicide are always already, and fundamentally, economic issues related to access to the resources needed to live. As Wilkerson and McRuer observe of the disability rights movement:

[I]t was about cultural redefinition, depathologization, and revaluation of an ethos of community and care, as opposed to the cutthroat individualism of the dominant culture; at its best, it generated a systematic critique, most particularly of labor, education, and healthcare systems. The movement, notably, grew out of or was (at least rhetorically) connected to other liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s including feminism and gay liberation, that also sought to redefine individual and group identities and to envision or more accessible, radically democratic public sphere. The historical antecedents of disability theory and activism that are now thriving position us to understand disability as more central to critiques of neoliberalism and globalization than to the supposedly inclusive new nationalism.<sup>16</sup>

In arguing that we understand American disability history as one of resistance to normativity, I join McRuer and Wilkerson in underscoring and advancing the radical roots of the disability movement and contend that doing so is central to contesting the neoliberal order as well as to producing disability histories that not white, heteronormative and nondisabled. As Paul Longmore, has observed, disabled people have long been uncovering and formulating sets of alternative values to the dominant nondisabled social, economic, and culture order, such that, people with disabilities “declare that they prize not self-sufficiency but self-determination, not independence but interdependence, not functional separateness but human community. This values-formation takes disability as its starting point.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to seeing disability as a frame to enhance and advance queer critiques of neoliberal culture and politics, my project effectively confounds, and I believe, constructively expands, investments in sexual identity and sexual practices held by both disability studies

and queer studies. For example, in his catalogue of crip cultural productions, Robert McRuer includes a film of disabled activist, writer, and poet Anne Finger reading her fictional story of a same-sex love affair between Helen Keller and Frida Kahlo. I spotlight McRuer's example here not only to underscore, but also, to contrast my own queering of Keller's popular image. While I certainly do not foreclose the potentially erotic "latent queer subtexts" of films like Terry Galloway's "Annie Dearest" (which I analyze in Chapter 3) I offer an assessment of queer counter-narratives of Keller that is highly skeptical of eroticizing Keller as a means of transgressing heteronormativity. This is because I, along with the self-identified lesbian poet and Keller aficionado Kathy Wolfe, understand the eroticizing of Keller's "straight" image to also be a form of normalization and regularization of her disabilities. The insistence that "everyone" (including the disabled) *must* have a sex life serves not only to preclude the possibility of asexuality among some people with disabilities, but also, to occlude loving and supportive relationships, domestic arrangements, and ways of living and being in the world not predicated on, or interpreted through, sexual status. While I am all for affirming the sexuality of disabled people (I do not want to replicate what Harlan Hahn has incisively called the "asexual objectification" of people with disabilities as unsuited for sex) I want avoid a normalizing insistence on a sexuality for all disabled that affirms the regulatory and devaluing notion that being sexually active, or even having sexual feelings, is a prerequisite to being human.<sup>18</sup> Nor do I wish to uncritically celebrate efforts to "recover" either a heterosexual or homosexual identity for Keller. If Keller's sexuality is to be her own then it must, finally, not be ours to claim or reclaim.

This does not mean we should not "queer" Keller's normative saintly, nonsexual image. It means, however, that we must do so in vigorously non-normative ways that leave



open all possibilities while being especially cautious, and conscious, of how sexualizing disabled people at once risks regulatory and exploitative objectifications, and, reproducing exclusions that ultimately degrade both disabled and nondisabled people who do not define themselves by whether or not, or in what way, they possess a sexual identity. Indeed I believe that one of the most important contributions disability studies can make to queer studies is to challenge what Jasbir Puar has called the “sex ableism” of queer studies.<sup>19</sup> In turn, I see queer studies as providing disability studies with analytical tools that move beyond the literature in disability studies and the disability movement which has frequently been focused on asserting, or “re-claiming” the heterosexuality of disabled people. Patrick White’s work on efforts to make blind youth heterosexual, which I discuss in Chapter 3, succinctly illustrates this point.

Thus far, I have situated my project as one in queer disability studies that seeks to compliment, and complicate, queer studies and disability studies. I now turn to questions of representation emanating from disability studies and discuss my use of visual culture analysis in this project. I describe a visual culture praxis that endeavors to expose and challenge the power of the visual to define disabled people and insist that we avoid the exclusionary and normalizing constructions that adhere to efforts to forge “positive” disability representations.

### **Disability Studies, Visual Culture Studies, and The Politics of Representation**

Feminist literary scholar and disability studies pioneer Rosemarie Garland Thomson contends that a central methodological objective of disability studies is to “transfigure disability within the cultural imagination.”<sup>20</sup> As a praxis, Thomson observes, disability studies “conceptualizes disability as a representational system rather than a medical problem, a discursive construction rather than a personal misfortune or a bodily flaw.” Situating

disability, and its intellectual corollary disability studies, firmly within the realm of representation, Thomson continues:

From this perspective, the body that we think of as disabled becomes a cultural artifact produced by material, discursive, and aesthetic practices that interpret bodily variation. Similar to ethnic or gender studies, disability studies is part of a larger critical methodology... which excavates the meanings of embodied differences and explores how the body has been understood over time. Such an approach focuses its analysis, then, on how disability is imagined, specifically on the figures and narratives that comprise the cultural context in which we know ourselves and one another.<sup>21</sup>

Thomson places disability studies here within a humanities tradition that includes “gender studies” and “ethnic studies.” In so doing she not only signals the significance and relevance of disability studies to other fields within the humanities, but also, shows how, as a discipline, disability studies has been centrally concerned with discursive, visual, and material representations. In addition, Thomson indicates how the discursive and the visual work to together in the domain of “aesthetic practices” to construe and culturally construct disability.

Furthermore, Thomson’s emphasis on the rhetorical, discursive, and symbolic domains points to an important methodological intervention into disability studies offered by visual culture studies. As Stuart Hall and Jessica Evans demonstrate, visual culture does not merely read visual or cultural representations as texts. Rather, visual culture insists—not only placing images and representations within their particular historical contexts—but also within the specific relations of production and consumption in which they are created. In addition, visual culture is attentive to the work done by distinct representational forms and the divergent modes of viewing and reception that these forms encourage or foreclose. Paintings, photos, and sculptures constitute very different visual forms, occur in different contexts, and

offer audiences different ways to receive, produce, and obtain cultural and historical knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

This intervention is important, I contend, because it offers disability scholars tools to analyze representations that allow them to attend to the historical, technological, and cultural particularities of representation not captured by the semiotic or textual models alone. Consider the work of Alan Sekula for example. His analysis of 19<sup>th</sup> century photography shows how photos emerged as technology of power that policed bodily difference. The fields of phrenology and psysiogomy for example, established the hegemony of an industrial capitalism that relied on a hierarchal division of labor and applauded its own success as “the outcome of individual cleverness and cunning.”<sup>23</sup> According to Sekula photos also became essential to the project of eugenics. Francis Galton sought to explicate and quantify the “biological” components of criminality in order to advance “the triumph of social rank over the forces social leveling and decline”<sup>24</sup> Lisa Cartwright’s work on medical images suggests how the medical model of disability did not emerge exclusively from the medical field but from the larger culture in which that field was situated, The medical model, Cartwright’s work implies, emerged from such places as the cinema, art, and photography and worked to verify and “scientifically” legitimate and re-enforce cultural assumptions about the body as medical fact.<sup>25</sup> Visual culture studies thus provides a rich, multi-dimensional texture to the study of disability representations. Likewise, disability studies demonstrates to visual culture scholars the centrality of disability to their field. Although disability is clearly central to Sekula and Cartwright’s work, neither addresses it explicitly as a specific category of analysis.

Filmmakers and disability studies scholars David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have usefully traced the history of disability studies through its shifting approaches to question of representation, noting the limitations and benefits of each approach. They identify four schools of thought on representation within disability studies and their work is helpful to situating my own approach to representation in this project. A focus on analyzing, discrediting, and charting the effects of negative disability imagery predominated the field of disability studies early on. Although this approach highlighted how cultural representations systematically degraded people with disabilities, it was also premised largely on a structuralist model of representation that assumed pre-determined outcomes would result from viewing negative images. The “negative images” school also tended slot disability representations into generic categories in ways that often collapsed representations into a sterile model of false consciousness.<sup>26</sup> The social realist model of representation emerged to counter the unilateral readings offered by the negative imagery approach by highlighting realism in disability representation. Rather than cheering “positive” representations, social realist insisted that myths such as the disabled “supercrip” hero or saint could be just as damaging as negative images, not only objectifying and humanizing disabled people, but also, in setting, and reinforcing impossible to achieve nondisabled standards.<sup>27</sup> The model of new historicism sought to complicate and enhance the negative and realist models by revealing how representations of disability were historically contingent and culturally variable while the biographical model has sought to focus on representations and analysis of representations created by people with disabilities.<sup>28</sup>

My own approach to representation in this project can be seen as drawing insights from each of the last three fields. I am concerned not just with “negative” images but also

with the normalizing work done by “positive” ones. I understand historicizing disability representations as essential to de-naturalizing them and recognizing the political and cultural work done by them. Viewing the Keller and Roosevelt statues within the context of neoliberalism, for example, is key to understanding the meanings and power that accrue to them in the contemporary moment in which they were created. I also see the “crip” narratives and counter-narratives of disability produced by disabled people as an important mode of challenging monolithic and hegemonic representations of disability, hence my engagement with cultural producers such as Georgina Kleege, Terry Galloway, and Kathi Wolfe.

One important commonality that visual culture studies and disability studies share is a concern for power and the material effects of representation. Discussing questions of disability representation at the modern museum, Richard Sandell and Jacelyn Dodd explicitly outline the political stakes of constructing disability, not only in the symbolic realm of culture, but also in the material and public domains that culture helps to forge and make real. As Sandell and Dodd explain:

There has long been a sense within the disability rights movement and amongst disability studies scholars that representation matters; that public portrayals of disabled people have effects and consequences which—though slippery, diffuse, and difficult to trace—are nonetheless ubiquitous and capable of shaping disabled people’s lives in innumerable and very tangible ways. Alongside struggles for employment and education rights, access to public services, political participation and so on, activist have, for more than two decades, argued that cultural representations are *constitutive* as well as *reflective* of ways of seeing, thinking, and talking about disability. These predominately negative and damaging conceptions have, in turn, shaped public policy, approaches to education, employment and welfare; they have framed interactions between disabled and non-disabled people and provided the justification for continuing forms of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression.<sup>29</sup>

This project began as one that assumed visual representations and “public portrayals” of disability did indeed matter to people with disabilities and could have a material effect on

their lives. After describing how her doctor discouraged her from pursuing graduate studies, Allison Kafer discusses her experiences of visual objectification after becoming disabled. Kafer's wheelchair and visible impairments forged "a representation" that led others "to bless me, pity me, or refuse to see me altogether. Although I may believe I am leading an engaging and satisfying life; they can see clearly the grim future that awaits me: with no hope of cure insight, my future cannot be anything but bleak."<sup>30</sup> Leading disability studies scholar Simi Linton also poignantly describes experiences of regulatory objectification brought about by her physical impairment. Following a car accident that left her paralyzed in the early 1970s, she was told not to concern herself with the questions she had about her sexuality and sexual function. Although she was just twenty years old and sexually active at the time, a male doctor assured Linton that marriage, sex, and children were foreclosed by her disability; an assertion that presumed heterosexual, patriarchal, procreative, marital sex to be the only sex imaginable or desirable for her.<sup>31</sup> The experiences of Linton and Kafer show cultural assumptions about, and representations of, disability shape the everyday experiences and interactions of disabled people and work to limit and constrain their life options. One of the reasons for my insistence on queering and "cripping" disability history is de-construct these normative and damaging assumptions.

Throughout this work, then, I take up visual culture analysis and de-constructive discursive analysis as critical methodological tools that allow me to queer—that is, question, disrupt, and make strange—otherwise normative visual and material representations of disability for public consumption. Put simply, visual *culture* analysis may be distinguished as a method by its commitment to interrogate, and render visible, the relationship between visual representation and dominant relations of power. Visual culture theorists term this

relationship “visuality.”<sup>32</sup> My analysis of Terry Galloway’s short film satire “Annie Dearest” in Chapter 1 provides an instance where visual culture analysis is the primary method used. I understand Galloway’s spoof of the film “The Miracle Worker” as explicitly confronting the relationship between dominant power structures and visual representation via a sardonic feminist and queer critique of normative and normalizing cultural notions of disability embodied by Keller’s pop cultural image.

Because Galloway’s film references other films and representations of “deviant” woman in Hollywood cinema, I propose that it may also be read as an instance of what visual culture theorist Nicholas Mizeroff has usefully termed “intervisuality.” By intervisuality, Mizeroff means simply to describe the relationship between multiple visual texts. Mizeroff contends, helpfully I believe, that we do not read images by themselves. Rather, we comprehend images in relationship to other images that we have seen and that are familiar to us.<sup>33</sup> Sometimes visual images contain explicit references to other visual images or representations. The Keller statue itself is a prime example of this. It was deliberately and strategically designed to reference William Gibson’s iconic stage and screenplay rendering of Keller at the water pump. In suggesting that intervisual analysis might be seen as a method at work in my dissertation, I mean to indicate how Mizeroff’s concept of intervisuality can be employed as a method to envisage and confront the larger visual economy of sex, gender, and disability in which representations of Helen Keller are situated.

Although my investigation is predominately and consistently concerned with the politics of visualizing and representing disability in American history, I often conduct more textual and discursive analysis than visual analysis. This is due in part to the rich textual narratives and counter-narratives of disability that I encountered throughout the course of my

research. The extraordinary counter-narrative of the Helen Keller statue unveiling offered by Alabama journalist and activist David Underhill I review in Chapter 1, for instance, not only provides a vivid satire of Alabama's normalizing uses of Keller's popular image, but also offer a literary enunciation of precisely how—as a cultural, political, and economic project—neoliberalism labors to sustain and naturalize existing structures of economic and social inequality via the deployment of heteronormative notions of race, gender, and ability that construe Keller, not as the social justice activist and critic of industrial capitalism she aspired to be, but as a pedagogical lesson in “proper” ascension to the norms, values, and expectations of a heteropatriarchal capitalist society that Keller understood to be quite often hostile the needs and interests of disabled people.

Textual sources were central to this project in other ways as well. For example, the battle over representing disability at the FDR Memorial that I discuss in Chapter 2 was a struggle that took place primarily in the press, in public documents, and in behind-the-scenes email exchanges and letters between activists, scholars, and the National Park Service. Because I seek in Chapter 2 to explicate that debate as a means of getting at the significance of presenting Roosevelt in his wheelchair, discourses about the visual at times eclipse the visual itself. At other times, of course, discursive texts work with visual images in this dissertation in ways that attempt to forge a field of meaning for audiences. The multi-textual character of the museum exhibitions I probe in Chapter 3 provides numerous examples of how images and texts are often intertwined in historical representations of disability and can therefore be analyzed together via a method known as intertextual analysis.

Sometimes intertextual analysis reveals disjunctures between discursive texts and the visual texts they describe that allow us to productively contemplate the differences and



tensions between the work done by visual images and that done by discourses. For instance, a section of the Everybody exhibition I discuss in Chapter 3 relates how people with disabilities have often been removed from their communities in order to be educated, reformed, cured, or corrected in institutions. The section's inaugural image is a photograph of a car traveling down what looks to be a typical suburban street. Single occupancy homes and carefully manicured lawns dot the landscape as the car moves round a cul-de-sac. In the foreground, a sign reads "No Wheelchairs Beyond this Point." The image is from the 1970s. The location and photographer are not known. The text accompanying the image reads simply "Questions about where people belong and who decides have created tension throughout American history."<sup>34</sup> The image enriches this deceptively matter-of-fact text by suggesting that wheelchairs do not belong, or at least must be contained and policed, within bucolic—read: white middle-class and heteronormative "family" oriented—communities. The photo and text thus accomplish together what neither could do alone; at once telling us that people with disabilities have been construed as not belonging in certain places and showing us how practices of un-belonging are structured by norms of race, class, heterosexuality, spatiality, and able-bodiedness. The curator's label alone, of course, could not allow us to achieve such depth of insight. Indeed trying to convey such nuance in a label for a broad public audience would risk alienating, rather than opening, minds. Neither could the image by itself evince the kind of historical context and continuity allowed by the curator's discursive framing of the image as indicative of a process that has "created tension throughout American history."

At this point I have outlined my methodological and theoretical approaches to this project. I have shown how, as a theory, visual culture seeks to understand the visual field in

relation to power and as a method it seeks to identify and explicate how specific visual forms work and how they are culturally, socially, and historically situated. I have also illustrated how, as theory, queer disability studies understands disability as forged through queerness and, as a method, it seeks to “queer” and call out the heteronormativities that attach to disability as well locate the ways in which disability challenges heteronormativity. In addition, I have specified how my project contributes to, and complicates, each of the fields from which I am working. Before turning to chapter summaries, I want to conclude my project with a brief discussion of why I elected to focus my attention on disability in public history and why I think this project marks an important intervention into American Studies.

### **Disability in Public History and American Studies**

As a field dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of American history and culture, American Studies is replete with scholarship addressing the questions of national belonging, visual and cultural representation, historical commemoration, and disability and difference that I take up in this dissertation. Erica Rand’s 2005 monograph *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* is one prominent example that brings these themes together and has inspired my own work as well as my commitment to uncovering nonnormative histories as a means of cultural critique and knowledge transformation. Rand’s book details how the material objects, images, and artifacts found at Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty advance white supremacy and American exceptionalism while presuming heterosexual and gender normative immigrants. Rand begins the book by pointing out that many of the migrants who passed through Ellis Island were subjected to medical testing and experimentation as well as shock treatment. She underscores throughout the book how the terms of national inclusion are forged along heteronormative lines of race, class, sex, gender, and “fitness” for citizenship.

While the public histories found at Ellis Island frequently eschew the island's history of regulation and normalization of would be "Americans" in favor of celebratory narratives of multicultural assimilation, Rand understands the histories, cultural narratives, and kitsch objects found at Ellis Island as ripe for critical cultural analysis that uncovers the political and cultural work done by historical representations for public consumption. For instance, Rand subversively declares the Statue of Liberty to be "one hot butch."<sup>35</sup> Rand productively contrasts her own queer reading of Lady Liberty with the normative and violent uses to which this iconic statue has been put. In the post-9/11 moment for example, Toby Kiehl's infamous song "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue" cast the Statue of Liberty as a vengeful fist-shaking "angry American" ready to put "a boot in the ass" of the U.S. nation-states unspecified racialized and "perverted" enemies. Another image of the statue circulating at the time depicted Liberty giving the finger with the text "We're coming, Motherfuckers!"<sup>36</sup>

Rand's consideration of the Statue of Liberty demonstrates how U.S. national histories and the embodiments found in these histories not only work to reflect and establish U.S. national identities predicated on viciously enforcing white heteronormativity while eradicating difference, but also, how U.S. history has been, and remains, a project of international imperialism, war, and domination of the world's resources. In her 2007 book *Tourists of History* preeminent American Studies scholar Marita Sturken contends that U.S. national identity and the telling and re-telling of American public histories at monuments, museums, and memorials have been "fundamentally based on a disavowal of the role played in world politics by the United States not simply as world power but as a nation with imperialist policies and aspirations empire."<sup>37</sup> Sturken persuasively demonstrates how objects and artifacts like teddy bears, snow globes, and flags commemorating national

tragedies such as the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 attacks work to forge a “culture of comfort” that establishes the U.S. nation-state and those who inhabit it as innocent victims. The trope of perennial American innocence not only serves to cleave U.S. national histories from actual historical processes and practices of empire, it also serves to bolster and reify those practices by allowing Americans to see themselves as innocent victims rather than as members of an aggressive nation-state whose actions on the world stage frequently contribute to war, injustice, and terrorist retribution.<sup>38</sup>

While Rand’s work implicates disability and difference in the process of policing national borders, Sturken’s work can arguably be seen as locating the immobilizing and normalizing consequences of national histories that occlude or romanticize the centrality of war and the effects of violence in U.S. history and culture. American Studies and communications scholar David Serlin, meanwhile, places disability at the very heart of his research around questions of normativity, national inclusion, public and popular culture, and U.S. social and medical history. Serlin’s work on post-World War II rehabilitative medicine, for instance, shows how prosthetic limbs were seen as a means to “restore” the heterosexual masculinity of returning veterans impaired by combat.<sup>39</sup> In his book *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* Serlin offers an extended in depth exploration of this phenomenon of heteropatriarchal restoration via medical prosthesis that reveals how a broader U.S. culture obsessed with plastic surgery, wonder drugs, and medical miracles promising to make Americans “normal” both reflected and contributed to a Cold War politics of conformity.<sup>40</sup> Serlin’s work has also engaged disability in the realm of visual culture. He edited and contributed to the 2010 volume *Imagining Illness*, a collection of essays from such visual culture studies luminaries as Lisa Cartwright and Sean Michelle Smith, that examines

how the visual culture of public health constitutes a system of knowledge production that works to modify or re-organize both public knowledge about health and the social and cultural relations produced through that knowledge.<sup>41</sup> Katherine Ott's contribution to this volume, for instance, details how the early theories and practices of dermatology construed the skin as a site for glimpsing knowledge about health, bodies, and the larger social order. Ott suggests, for example, how the practices and beliefs of dermatology reflected processes of Western colonization, conquest, and "mastery" over "others" and otherness.<sup>42</sup>

My own work is very much engaged in the kinds of scholarly efforts in American Studies discussed above. Like Rand and Sturken, I understand U.S. national histories and its practices and emblems of commemoration to be to a key site for establishing, interrogating, and challenging notions of national belonging and identity. I recognize U.S. histories for public consumption as implicated in, and animated in part by, larger global efforts by the U.S. to achieve power, influence, and empire. While this particular aspect of U.S. culture, history, and disability is reflected mostly in my conclusion to this work, this crucial dimension of contemporary American Studies promises to shape my work moving forward. Furthermore, I join Serlin and Ott in viewing disability as both central to U.S. national history and imperative to understanding that history. I also believe that queer theory and queer disability praxis—of the kind exhibited by Rand and Serlin respectively—is a powerful tool for comprehending and re-thinking disability and its relationship to heteronormative U.S. national narratives, cultural practices, and beliefs. I believe my own work compliments and extends these endeavors in American Studies by examining heretofore unexplored archives such as the Keller statue and coin and by shedding new light on established public histories such as the FDR Memorial controversy and the disability rights movement.

Moreover, as locations of cultural and representational struggle around disability, public histories of disability can demonstrate how responses to, and conceptions of, disability are not inescapable or in any sense “natural” but are instead fabricated according to particular social norms, cultural values, and economic practices that prevail in any given historical period. Indeed, public history is a particularly rich and effective archive from which to uncover, question, and re-think “disability.” This is not only because increasing millions continue to visit places like the Smithsonian, the FDR Memorial, and the U.S. Capitol each year while millions more take in the digital histories that each of these places now provides to online audiences,<sup>43</sup> but also because, when done well, public history can make the production of knowledge about disability visible to audiences in ways that compel them to re-consider entrenched values, beliefs, and assumptions. As Smithsonian curator and historian of medicine and disability Katherine Ott observes of the contemporary museum:

Although their origins may be suspect, grounded as they are in pillage, privilege, and exploitation of the notorious ‘Other,’ the museum form has an important and redeemable role in modern culture. Artifacts, and the exhibitions that display them, operationalize and make concrete human experiences so that others can imagine, learn from, and connect with them. One of the core functions of museums is to hold up artifacts for examination and discussion. Museums give visitors things to think about and are forums for conversation.<sup>44</sup>

In conjuring forth the colonial origins and legacies of the museum, Ott reveals how the exhibition has been a key site for the production and proliferation of normative and regulatory knowledge about the bodies and the lives of “others.” Museums were (and in many instances no doubt remain) the places where the privileged publics at the imperial center could freely and comfortably “pillage” and “exploit” those racialized and gendered “others” on the colonial periphery over and against whom they defined themselves as naturally deserving of superior status. Yet, as Ott suggests, it is precisely their dubious

bequest of colonial and normative violence that offers museums the possibility of finding an “important and redeemable role” in the present as a place to hold up for interrogation, critique, and discussion dominant perceptions and assumptions of history and the “self” and “other.”

Dipesh Chakrabarty makes a similar point about knowledge production, reception, and contestation in “public” histories which have historically delineated the “public” along lines of dominant and subordinated lives and knowledges. Writing on “museums in late-democracies” Chakrabarty observes:

The history of colonialism and of colonial knowledge shows how the universalistic and humanistic analytic frames of the social sciences were once used to classify, control, and subordinate the colonized both within and outside the West. It is the same process that also resulted in the pre-colonial knowledge systems of the colonized now living subjugated lives, relegated to the supposedly parochial and untheoretical realms of ‘experience.’ It is precisely against such a politics of knowledge that the cry goes up from time to time from the ranks of the historically-oppressed, “to hell with your archives, we have our experience!”<sup>45</sup>

In this passage, Chakrabarty specifies a colonialist “politics of knowledge” that construes the experiences of “historically-oppressed” groups as containing “parochial and untheoretical” knowledge unworthy of serious consideration. And yet, like Ott, and American Studies scholar Erica Rand, Chakrabarty sees potential in the visual and material artifacts and objects of public history to challenge dominant knowledges that privilege normative histories and perceptions over subordinated ones. Chakrabarty distinguishes between two models of democracy. The pedagogical model privileges the capacity for abstract reasoning and intellect that, according Chakrabarty, defines “citizens” by their capacity to achieve such reasoning and obtain the “lessons” necessary for citizenship.

The performative model, on the hand, does not assume that knowledge is achieved and disseminated only through an educated, intellectually “able” citizenry. Without dismissing the “critical-political edge” made possible by abstract reasoning (how else, Chakrabarty concedes, could such concepts as capital, social structure, or instrumental relationality be visualized and understood as real) Chakrabarty insists that knowledge is also embodied, experienced, and sensory.<sup>46</sup> To be clear, Chakrabarty is not arguing, nor would I, that there is a definite, discernable, or necessarily counter-hegemonic knowledge that resides within particular bodies or groups of bodies. Nor does he suggests that “embodied” or “sensory” knowledge can be disaggregated or intstrumentalized “outside” of the abstract cultural and historical knowledges that no doubt shape the reception of all knowledge sensory, embodied, or otherwise.

What Chakrabarty does propose is that, in conveying and taking seriously the knowledges that reside within objects, images, and experiences and material cultures of broad “publics,” including marginalized groups, abstract knowledge can be productively applied to visual, sensory, tactile, and experiential knowledge in ways that productively call into question, and can potentially transform, existing knowledges and privileged ways of knowing. This is an opportunity that museums and, by extension, other sites of public history offer that the academy alone cannot. Notes Chakrabarty:

University education can train us, as I have said, to visualize as concrete that which is invisible to the natural eye. But it speaks to (and of) a disembodied subject of history, a position that we individually are called upon to inhabit when we know the world from that position. The museum of today, however, increasingly opens itself up to the embodied and the lived. It provides as much ‘experience’ as abstract knowledge<sup>47</sup>

In this passage, Chakrabarty emphasizes that it is abstract and sensory knowledge working together that gives the museum its particular power. Chakrabarty also warns, however, of the



dangers of applying abstract knowledges alone to “disembodied” subjects of history. As Chakrabarty makes clear, abstract knowledge applied to embodiments in the name of disembodied subject performs a colonizing and regularizing function that purports to “know” those embodiments as expressive of some inner “truth” that validates the hegemonic order in part by devaluing those embodiments as “other.” Just as the nondisabled people encountered by Kafer and Linton assumed an intimate knowledge of their bodies and futures based on abstract cultural assumptions and biases about disabilities, public histories of disability that fail to interrogate the dominant assumptions that attach to objects and embodiments succeed only in reproducing the normative and often violent effects of those assumptions.

In aligning this project with Ott and Chakrabarty, I contend that objects, images, and artifacts of disability history not dependent on abstract reasoning or cognitive ability and not tied to normative nondisabled histories of overcoming disability can indeed effect a change in knowledge production about disability. In chapter 1, for instance, I uncover knowledges of Helen Keller that verify and validate her disabilities, not as a detriment to knowledge, but a window to new knowledges. Rather than insisting that Keller had to work to “overcome” her impairments in order to become “more human,” the poet Kathi Wolfe reveals how Keller’s disabilities did not prevent her from enjoying a rich and sensuous life field with discovery and incisive recognitions of the world around her. My work is inspired by many scholars in the field of museum studies including James Gardener who argues that museums have an intellectual and civic obligation to fundamentally challenge popular assumptions about history; Timothy Luke who views museums as inherently political domains that often attempt to forge “normative truths” through the presentation of art, culture, and history; and

Kylie Message whose work on the “new museum” documents the influence of postmodernist and post-structuralist thinking on contemporary museums.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, my project champion’s former National Museum of American History and National Park Service Director Roger Kennedy’s assertion that “objects speak most powerfully in intentional juxtaposition.”<sup>49</sup> As such, I work throughout this study to juxtapose normative knowledges and histories of disability with non-normative crip/queer knowledges of disability in a concerted effort to forge new ways of thinking, talking about, and understanding the history of disability in the United States. This project, I believe, marks an important contribution to American Studies. As a field of inquiry, American Studies has played a vital and arguably unparalleled role in the efforts of humanities scholars to uncover, question, critique, and transform knowledge about U.S. history and culture as well as about U.S.-centric conceptions of “America” and its raced, classed, gendered, sexed, and nationalist-imperialist meanings. Yet disability remains underrepresented as a category of analysis in the field. As U.S. disability studies scholars such as Leonard Davis, Pual Longmore, and Simi Linton have noted, although disability studies has emerged as a vibrant part of interdisciplinary studies in the humanities, there is much room for growth as the subject of disability and the experiences and histories of people with disabilities continue to be relegated largely to the scientific, medical, rehabilitative fields.<sup>50</sup> It is my hope that this work helps to mitigate this dearth of cultural knowledge about disability and in turn adds to the project of American Studies as well as to U.S. public history.

## **Chapter Summaries**

**Chapter 1: Making Public History: Disability, Heteronormativity, and Contemporary Representations Helen Keller.** This chapter explores contemporary

renderings of Helen Keller's image and likeness commissioned by her home state of Alabama alongside current cultural representations of her offered by feminist and disability studies scholars, social justice activists, and queer and disabled artists and cultural producers. I examine a bronze statue depicting Keller as a child in her famous "moment of discovery" at the water pump recently donated by the State of Alabama to the U.S. Capitol's Statuary Hall collection and a United States quarter bearing Keller's image minted in 2003 to commemorate Alabama's statehood. I contrast Alabama's use of popular narratives and visual images of Keller with specific counter narratives of Keller's image, life, and work, including feminist literary scholar Georgina Kleege's 2006 book *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller*, Kathi Wolfe's 2008 collection of poems "Helen Takes the Stage," Terry Galloway's 2009 film parody "Annie Dearest," and a 2009 satirical short story by Alabama journalist and social justice activist David Underhill entitled "The Apotheosis of Helen Keller."

I demonstrate how the visual representations and material embodiments of Keller offered by the state of Alabama reproduce and reify able-bodied, heteronormative, and patriarchal standards and expectations of sex, race, gender, and disability in ways that erase her social justice activism, bolster the interests of contemporary neoliberalism, and present a white racial heteronormative history of triumph over disability that not only obscures, but alibis, the state's historic and on-going role in pathologizing and marginalizing disabled people. At the same time, I show how the counter-narratives and representations of Keller created by Kleege, Galloway, Underhill, and Wolfe labor to expose, critique, and subvert Alabama's official heteronormative histories of her. I argue that heteronormative and able-bodied constructions and expectations of gender and disability were central to Alabama's

construction and deployment of Helen Keller’s image. In rendering transparent the heteronormative social and cultural construction of Helen Keller, these artists, activist, and cultural producers allow us to see how normative, nondisabled cultural expectations of disability are linked to larger structural issues of social and economic justice and disability oppression that Keller attempted to address, engage, and effect throughout her life.

**Chapter 2: ‘An Argument in Bronze’: The FDR Memorial Controversy, Queer Disability Studies, and the Politics of Representing Disability in Contemporary Public History.** This chapter examines the controversy surrounding the 2001 addition of a statue depicting President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a wheelchair at the FDR Memorial in Washington, D.C. I consider the public debate over whether to show FDR in a wheelchair—in light of portrayals of his polio—offered by curators of the 2005 Smithsonian exhibition *Whatever happened to Polio*. Arguing against popular narratives of FDR’s polio as an embodied condition he heroically “overcame,” I contend that visual analysis informed by queer disability studies can make possible histories of Roosevelt’s polio for public consumption that are not premised on the president’s ability to conform to gendered and able-bodied notions of strength, proficiency, and ability.

Furthermore, I argue that public histories of FDR’s paralysis that do not depend on bolstering his able-bodied status not only help to expose and challenge the supremacy of visual culture in defining and regulating disability, but also labor to produce new understandings of disability history that are not necessarily grounded in able-bodied perceptions and perspectives. Histories of FDR’s polio grounded in queer disability studies thus also work to confront the pervasive cultural fiction that disability most often is a visibly discernable, personal, and physiological “problem” best addressed through the correction,

erasure, or assimilation of physical and cognitive difference to able-bodied norms and standards of social, aesthetic, and economic value while also challenging white normative nationalist histories.

### **Chapter 3: Re-Presenting Disability at the Smithsonian: A Crip/Queer Analysis.**

This chapter analyzes two exhibitions on the history of disability in the United States produced by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. I consider the material objects, visual images, life stories, and historical narratives found in a 2000 exhibition marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act and a 2013 digital exhibition entitled "Everybody: An Artifact History of Disability in America." I argue that, placing a crip/queer lens on these exhibitions reveals how disability is an inherently *political* social and cultural formation affixed to questions of identity, community, autonomy, and social and economic value which are inextricably bound up with dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

In this way, I contend, my crip/queer reading of these these exhibits helps to expose and render transparent the social and cultural production of "disability" in the United States. When viewed through a crip/queer lens, these exhibitions not only allow for a thorough interrogation of medical models of disability as something "in" the body and "outside" the social, but also confound, and productively complicate, the minority identity and civil rights model of disability history deployed both by the disability rights movement and its intellectual corollary disability studies. I provide an analysis of the artifacts in these exhibits that argue against viewing the history of disability in the United States as civil rights struggle and expose the limits of, as well as the erasures, produced by civil rights frameworks.

Furthermore, the images, artifacts, and historical narratives of disability I assess in these exhibits question the deployment of disability by the state as an organizing category of identity and eschew notions of a shared disability history to focus us instead on the ways in which identifying the disabled as a distinct group has been a regularizing and normalizing project inflected by norms of race, class, gender, and sexuality and powered by a drive to erase differences that call into question the violent normativities of a heteropatriarchal U.S. nation-state that demands able-bodiedness, defines success in terms of wealth, beauty, and power, and marks for death or exploits for profit those bodies and persons that do not measure up. Given the history of state violence against the disabled that these artifacts uncover, I argue that disability historians, scholars, and activists are better served by a queer model of disability history which questions identification and identity, and the normalizing uses to which these are put, rather than a minority model premised on advancing a logic of “different” but equal that ultimately leaves unquestioned the normalizing tenants of a liberal democracy that consistently holds up inclusion, integration, and assimilation of differences as the fin de siècle of social justice struggles.

## Notes

1. By “heteronormative” I mean to indicate not just the presumption of heterosexuality that consistently structures the cultural production and reception of disability in the United States, but also, the normative paradigms and ideologies of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, economic productivity, and familial and domestic arrangements that fabricate white, male, married, heterosexual able-bodiedness as the standard to which all Americans—especially the disabled—should aspire.
2. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 37.
3. Allison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 33.
4. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 42.

5. Eli Clare, "Stolen Bodies, Reclaimed Bodies: Queerness and Disability," *Public Culture* 13.3 (2001): 360-361.
6. McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 155.
7. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 34.
8. McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 34.
9. Carrie Sandahl, "Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9.1-2 (2003): 36.
10. Ibid
11. Ibid, 26
12. Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
13. Ellen Samuels, "My Body My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-out Discourse," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9.1-2 (2003): 244.
14. Sandahl, "Queering the Crip," 27.
15. McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 72.
16. Robert McRuer and Abby R. Wilkerson, "Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9.1-2 (2003): 12.
17. Ibid, 17
18. Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 25
19. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow eds, *Sex and Disability* Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. Puar is quoted as such on the back cover.
20. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "The Beauty and the Freak" *Michigan Quarterly Review* 37.3 (Summer 1998), 1-2.
21. Ibid
22. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall eds., *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 3.
23. Alan Sekula, "The Body in the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 3-64.
24. Ibid.
25. Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
26. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, "Representation and Its Discontents: The Uneasy Home of Disability in Literature and Film," in *The Handbook of Disability Studies* Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury, eds. (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 198.
27. Ibid, 200
28. Ibid, 208
29. Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson, eds., *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency at the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3.
30. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 2
31. Simi Linton, *My Body Politic: A Memoir* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 12.
32. Nicholas Mirzoeff ed., *The Visual Culture Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Routledge, 2007), 18.
33. Ibid.

34. Everybody Exhibiton The Smithsonian Exhibition 2013  
<http://everybody.si.edu/place/removal>
35. Erica Rand, *The Ellis Island Snow Globe*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 107.
36. Ibid., 109.
37. Marita Sturken, *Tourist of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 7.
38. Ibid.
39. David Serlin, "Engineering Masculinity: Veterans and Prosthetics After World War Two," in *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics*, Katherine Ott, David Serlin, and Stephen Mihm, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 45-74.
40. David Serlin, *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002.
41. David Serlin, ed. *Imagining Illness: Public Health and Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxviii.
42. Katherine Ott, "Contagion, Public Health, and the Visual Culture of Nineteenth Century Skin," in *Imagining Illness: Public Health and Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 87-88.
43. For more precise figures on the number of annual visitors to the Smithsonian see "Visits to the Smithsonian: 1996-2006," Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis, May 2007. <http://www.si.edu/opanda/siwide>
44. Katherine Ott, "Collective Bodies: What Museums do For Disability Studies," in *Re-Presenting Disability*, Sandell, Dood, and Thomson, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 274.
45. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Museums in Late Democracies," *Humanities Research* 9.1 (2002): 9.
46. Ibid., 8.
47. Ibid.
48. See James B. Gardener, "Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public," *The Public Historian* 26.4 (Fall 2004): 11-21. and Timothy Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002),xxiv, and Kylie Message, *New Museums and the Making of Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2006.
49. Roger G. Kennedy, "Some Thoughts on National Museums," in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*. Bettina Messias Carbonell, ed. (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 304.
50. Leonard J. Davis, ed. *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), XV. See also Paul K. Longmore, *Why I burned my Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 3. And Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.



## **Chapter 1: Making Public History: Disability, Heteronormativity, and Contemporary Representations Helen Keller**

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores contemporary renderings of Helen Keller's image and likeness commissioned by her home state of Alabama alongside current cultural representations of her offered by feminist and disability studies scholars, social justice activists, and queer and disabled artists and cultural producers. I examine a bronze statue depicting Keller as a child in her famous "moment of discovery" at the water pump recently donated by the State of Alabama to the U.S. Capitol's Statuary Hall collection and a United States quarter bearing Keller's image minted in 2003 to commemorate Alabama's statehood. I contrast Alabama's use of popular narratives and visual images of Keller with specific counter narratives of Keller's image, life, and work, including feminist literary scholar Georgina Kleege's 2006 book *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller*, Kathi Wolfe's 2008 collection of poems "Helen Takes the Stage," Terry Galloway's 2009 film parody "Annie Dearest," and a 2009 satirical short story by Alabama journalist and social justice activist David Underhill entitled "The Apotheosis of Helen Keller."

I demonstrate how the visual representations and material embodiments of Keller offered by the state of Alabama reproduce and reify able-bodied, heteronormative, and patriarchal standards and expectations of sex, race, gender, and disability in ways that erase her social justice activism, bolster the interests of contemporary neoliberalism, and present a white racial heteronormative history of triumph over disability that not only obscures, but alibis, the state's historic and on-going role in pathologizing and marginalizing disabled people. At the same time, I show how the counter-narratives and representations of Keller

created by Kleege, Galloway, Underhill, and Wolfe labor to expose, critique, and subvert Alabama's official heteronormative histories of her. I argue that heteronormative and able-bodied constructions and expectations of gender and disability were central to Alabama's construction and deployment of Helen Keller's image. In rendering transparent the heteronormative social and cultural construction of Helen Keller, these artists, activist, and cultural producers allow us to see how normative, nondisabled cultural expectations of disability are linked to larger structural issues of social and economic justice and disability oppression that Keller attempted to address, engage, and effect throughout her life.

It is not only that Keller's popular image is used to naturalize contemporary neoliberalism while occluding the knowledges and histories of her life that might challenge and call into question a neoliberal order that produces social and economic inequality and exclusion for those with disabilities and other marginalized populations. It is also, I contend, that the sexed, gendered, and able-bodied production of Helen Keller is central to the obstruction of nonnormative histories and knowledges that might challenge on-going structures of inequality and injustice. By exposing how sexed and gender cultural knowledges of Keller's disability connect to larger social and economic processes and structures of inequality; we can not only begin to confront sexed and gendered stereotypes of disability while also correcting, complicating, and expanding historical and cultural understandings of Keller's life and work, but also, labor to produce new knowledges of sex, gender, and disability that challenge systematic oppression and inequality.

As my introduction to this project suggests, I believe this is precisely the kind of cultural, scholarly, and political project that McRuer and Sandahl call for when they insist on "cripping" culture and history to reveal, not only the heteronormative social and cultural

regulation and oppression of disabled people, but also, ways of challenging and transforming the knowledges and conditions that support and sustain that oppression. As such, I see this opening chapter as a fitting beginning to the dissertation and I aim to demonstrate my various overlapping investment here in queer disability studies, visual culture studies, and critiques of neoliberalism.

I begin this chapter by examining a United States quarter bearing Keller's image. I show how the saintly spinster image of Keller presented on the quarter works to occlude Keller's investments in social justice activism and anti-capitalist critique by presenting a pedagogical lesson in "what is possible" for "everyone" in the United States. I illustrate how the quarter compliments and naturalizes Alabama's contemporary neoliberal social and political order. I then move to an examination of the Helen Keller statue now residing in the U.S. Capitol's Statuary Hall collection. I pay particular attention to how the normative, nondisabled "aesthetic" and visual concerns of the statue's producers worked to occlude Keller's disabilities in order to present a heteronormative, ableist material embodiment of her. I suggest the ways in which presenting Keller as a child "overcoming" her disabilities denies her the intellectual, feminist, and activist identity she strived to cultivate and I contrast the image of Keller presented by the statue with the representations of Keller offered by Kleege, Galloway, and Wolfe in order to uncover how heteronormative understanding of sex, gender, and disability were essential to eliding Keller's identity as a writer and activist. In addition, I show how Kleege's attempt to recover heterosexual identity for Keller reveals an investment in heteronormativity and suggests how critiques of excluding disabled people from heterosexuality work to privilege and reify, rather challenge, heteronormativity. I also join

Kathi Wolfe in questioning the assignment of a normative “lesbian” identity to Keller since this again maneuvers to position Keller’s sexuality as a benchmark of her humanity.

In addition, I demonstrate how Kleege, Galloway, and Wolfe offer non-able-bodied knowledges of Keller that critique the role of visibility and the visual field in defining and producing normative knowledge about disability. Finally, I deconstruct a parody of the Keller statue unveiling written by Mobile, Alabama-based writer and activist David Underhill. I interpret Underhill’s work as a way to reveal the connections between Keller’s sexed, raced, gendered, and nondisabled cultural persona and the operations of social and economic injustice that Keller strived to unveil during her lifetime.

### **‘First Lady of Courage’: State Pedagogies of Helen Keller**

In October 2002, the State of Alabama announced that Helen Keller’s image would be the centerpiece of its new state quarter set for nation-wide release by the U.S. mint in March of the following year. *The Birmingham News* quoted Governor Don Siegelman: “Helen Keller symbolizes the courage of a people who’ve been through civil war and civil rights. She is a visible reminder of the importance of education and determination, and the importance of having a good teacher.”<sup>1</sup> A visual analysis of the coin and attention to the discourses of disability and “courage” surrounding reveals how the normative persona of Keller presented in the coin erases her social justice activism, sustains and naturalizes the inequities produced by Alabama’s contemporary social and economic order, and works to advance a white racial heteronormative of Keller that justifies the on-going exclusion and marginalization of disabled people in Alabama people.

The coin features an engraved reproduction of a photograph of Keller solicited from the Keller family. The image depicts a middle-aged Keller seated upright in a chair running

her fingers over a book. Presumably she is reading Braille. Directly above Keller is the year “1819” and then, further up, “ALABAMA.” In a banner immediately below Keller is the inscription “SPIRIT OF COURAGE” rendered in capitalized block-lettering along with the year (2003) and the motto featured on every U.S. coin “E PLURIBUS UNUM.” Keller’s name is engraved in both English and Braille to the right of her image. Further to the right, is the State’s flower, the camellia. A branch of the State’s tree, the longleaf pine, is visually and materially engraved to the left of Keller.

The emblems of state that frame Keller’s image iterate her visual and discursive incorporation into the State of Alabama while also, subtly but powerfully, forging the terms of inclusion in the contemporary neoliberal nation-state for both Keller and Alabama.



**Figure 1. Alabama’s 2003 Quarter Commemorating Statehood.**

These images accomplish this in large part by working to reinforce contemporary neoliberal cultural understandings about economy and civic duty that implicate disability while

obscuring the socioeconomic and cultural foundations of disability oppression. Reading the coin from left to right, we are drawn first to the pine leaf and the iconography of state and economic power it evokes.

Indeed, the long-leaf pine that inaugurates the framing of Keller's image as an icon of state can be said to signal Alabama's incorporation into the economic order of the contemporary United States, an order that displaces the state's historically slave-based economy in favor of the neoliberal "tree" economy of 2003. Based still on the domination and crude extraction of the state's vital resources, this economic order is also a cultural and political order in which the operations of economic inequality are presented as "technical" processes abstracted from their political implications as well as the cultural assumptions that attempt to render such inequalities as somehow natural or inevitable.<sup>2</sup>

Continuing right from the pine leaf, viewers encounter an image of Keller that depicts her as, to borrow Kim Nielson's phrase, "the politically safe but glorified superblind saintly spinster" of her later years.<sup>3</sup> Like the narratives of corporate citizenship offered by International Paper to rationalize its exploitation of the state's people and pine resources, the image of Keller here offers an apolitical lesson in civic responsibility defined by, in Patrick Shannon's words, "concern for self-development, personal emotions, self-reliance, privacy, and competition rather than concern for social development, service to community, cooperation toward shared goals, community, and shared prosperity."<sup>4</sup> Keller is seated alone and upright, her cozy attire and wooden wicker chair the accoutrements of aristocracy and privatized domesticity. This aristocratic domesticity is again evoked by the string of camellias to her right. If the state's quarter iterates how the state views itself and expresses its ideals of citizenship, than the staid, schoolmarm, yet elevated image of Keller laden with

flowers presented here suggests an investment in notions of femininity, class-status, and domesticity that often had little to do with Keller's real life experiences or the lessons she urged us all to learn from those experiences and from her own education.

Helen Keller was, of course, an intellectually gifted woman who surmounted many of the limitations placed on her through learned determination, and determination to learn. She was the first deaf-blind person ever to graduate from college. She learned to communicate primarily through the manual alphabet, but could read Braille in several languages including German, French, and Japanese. She learned to type using a specially adapted Braille keyboard. But, crucially, she was also someone who worked throughout her life to promote social change. An integral part of many of the social movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Keller understood that her ability to “overcome” her multiple challenges rested in large part on her class privilege—a privilege that, as Ruth Hubbard has pointed out, was not shared by most of her blind-deaf contemporaries. “I’ve owed my success partly to the advantages of my birth and environment,” Keller once said. Adding, “I’ve learned that the power to rise is not within the reach of everyone.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet the studious and determined portrait presented on the quarter offers no hint of Keller's investment in collective struggle. It presents her alone, her struggle a privatized one marked by individual effort framed as “courageous.” But what did Keller do that was so courageous? Speak out against injustice? Champion the causes of labor and women's rights? She is reading a book. “But what,” asks John Davis, “is she reading?”<sup>6</sup> The Governor's statements about Keller's “determination” and “courage” make no mention of the courage it took for Keller to stand with striking mill workers, speak out against American entrance into World War I when doing so meant risking jail, or write explicitly and scandalously of the

need to address sexually transmitted diseases as a major cause of blindness. Likewise, instead of contextualizing Keller's legacy as one embedded in the collective struggle of the state's people to achieve freedom and justice along with the rest of the nation, the image of the middle-aged Keller reading in Braille mythologizes her as a paragon of personal virtue whose individual achievements are meant to remind everyone of what's possible even for disabled people. As Governor Siegleman reminded audiences at the time "'Spirit of Courage' represents the strength, perseverance and positive attitude of Alabamians who, from their earliest habitation, have shown remarkable courage. Embodying such courage in the face of overwhelming challenges was Helen Keller, whose life and spirit continue to inspire generations the world over."<sup>7</sup> The American Numismatic Association was even more perniciously vague in its praising of the coin, writing in March of 2003 "Seeking and accepting challenges, Helen Keller saw no obstacles in what might have been an inaccessible world. As such, she is a sensible and sensitive choice for the Alabama quarter."<sup>8</sup>

Of course the notion that Helen Keller "saw no obstacles in what might have been an inaccessible world" is completely counterfactual to Keller's work as a social activist aware of the world's many obstacles and intent on bolstering accessibility and possibility through her pursuit of social justice for the poor and disabled. As James Loewen has pointed out, those seeking to deploy Keller's persona for educational purposes are hard pressed indeed to overlook her investment in radical politics. "The producers of the film-strips, movies, and other educational materials on Helen Keller surely know she was a socialist; no one can read Keller's writing without becoming aware of her political and social philosophy."<sup>9</sup> Yet the desire to place Keller on a pedagogical pedestal remains persistent. Keller's deployment as the archetype of the good blind-deaf girl who studied hard and went to Radcliffe, serves



many purposes. It does more than just occlude her critiques of the structures of economic inequality still in place in Alabama today and elsewhere or deny her investment in collective political struggle. It also displaces the socio-political, economic, and cultural enablers of disability. Additionally, as transgender poet, activist, and queer disability theorist Eli Clare has argued, pedagogical lessons about adherence to civic norms like those advanced by Governor Siegleman and the Keller coin are necessarily tied to larger structures of normativity that seek to eradicate difference and justify the extraction and exploitation of environmental resources for economic gain.

In his ground-breaking memoir *Exile and Pride*, Clare deftly and explicitly draws the links between the extractive and exploitative timber economy of her native Oregon and the everyday normative oppressions she faced as a queer and disabled person.

My classmates and I were taught by teachers who worked for schools funded largely with timber taxes; by U.S. Forest Service rangers and their brochures; and by industry-sponsored textbooks, displays, slide-shows and tours. The point isn't simply that we, like school children across the country were taught have-truths about trees and salmon. Rather, we learned even more fundamental lessons, that trees and salmon are endlessly renewable commodities. The view of the natural world, which puts clear-cutting, replanting, and hierarchies at its center, conveniently supported the two-industries, logging and fishing, that sustained the towns we lived in.<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, practices of public history, schoolroom pedagogy, and cultural and historical knowledge production (brochures, textbooks, slide-shows, and tours) work with economic systems to produce normative knowledge about the “natural world.” Clare understands such normative knowledges as also structuring the understandings of gender, sexuality, and ability that work to regulate disabled bodies. Thus, for Clare, civic lessons and pedagogical knowledge about the “natural world” (as well as what and who counts as normal)

“conveniently supported” existing relations of power where hierarchical heteropatriarchal norms work to sustain and naturalize processes of extraction and production.

Consider for instance, Alabama’s own extractive timber economy emblemized proudly on the Keller coin itself. Timber, especially the pine variety, is Alabama’s biggest agricultural commodity. It’s appearance on the Keller coin is thus not coincidental. The pine leaves on the coin subtly suggests how Keller’s staid demeanor is representative of the social and economic order the state wishes to reify as both natural and inevitable. By the year 2000, pine production had reached an all-time high. Productivity had also more than doubled between 1980 and 2000 meaning that significantly fewer workers were needed to do the work of harvesting trees. The cotton fields that once fueled the slave trade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were largely gone as huge swaths of the state’s legendarily rich soil became covered by pine trees. But, as the *Birmingham News* detailed in an extensive special report in October of 2002 (the same week the Keller-coin’s minting was announced), Alabama’s modern “tree economy” was not bringing prosperity to its people. Entitled, “Land is power, and most who wield it are outsiders,” the report noted that timber companies were by far the state’s largest landowners. Holding nearly 2/3 of the land in the state’s most fertile region, an area dubbed the Black Belt for the unparalleled quality of its soil, virtually all the owners and benefactors of the state’s timberland lived outside the state. Drawing on census figures and tax-records, the report also showed that the timber industry’s absentee landowners contributed relatively little to the state’s already paltry tax base.<sup>11</sup>

Alabama’s property taxes are the lowest in the nation and the state’s 1901 Constitution, backed heavily by wealthy planters and landowners, protects land wealth from even modest taxation, forcing local governments to rely heavily on high regressive sales

taxes to fund schools and communities. The result, the report concludes, is that local public schools struggle while in-state residents not only bear an unfair tax-burden, but lack access to the land, resources, education, and power necessary for economic self-sufficiency.

Birmingham lawyer and Black Belt native Jim J. Thompson is blunt in his assessment of the rules that allow timber companies to side-step paying taxes on the actual market value of their land. "Slavery still exists in Alabama," Thompson tells reporters. "Great masses of people live like indentured servants, on one paycheck to the next," he adds, noting that the state's unfair tax rules for timberland owners "kill the schools."<sup>12</sup> Reporters John Archibald and Jim Hansen also quote Hale County's state legislature Bobby Singleton: "Timber companies own 45 percent of all our land," said Singleton. "We've not gotten a lot of participation from them. They pay little or no taxes in these counties. We have asked them to build plants here or directly support industries in those areas," he said. "We have asked them to help us recruit industry to our area, but they have not responded." The article then quotes an International Paper spokesperson who argued that "The company expects its 4,607 workers to be active in their own communities, and the International Paper Foundation spent nearly \$300,000 in Alabama last year for educational and civic needs."<sup>13</sup> But Alabama's contemporary neoliberal order, like all neoliberal projects, labors to make "active" citizen participation difficult. The Keller coin advances of narrative of non-active citizenship by presenting a docile normative image of Keller that suggests how submission to heteronormative expectations of disability is characteristic of one's "Spirit of Courage." Attention to the ways in which Keller defied the image of a spinster by engaging directly in challenging economic inequality would risks calling into the economic equalities that continue to be produced by Alabama's social and economic structure.

In his 2004 book *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, Historian Wayne Flynt explains that the consequences of Alabama's current neoliberal political economy are structural and rooted in a state government specifically and explicitly designed to disenfranchise poor blacks and whites while concentrating power into the hands of lobbyist and wealthy elites. Writes Wayne: "Striking down overtly racist sections of Alabama's constitution became the easy task of the civil rights movement. The less obvious and more profound discrimination was deeply embedded in provisions dealing with tax policy, education, and home rule."<sup>14</sup> "Home rule"—the idea that local governments should have purview over local issues—does not exist under Alabama State law. Counties, cities, and rural municipalities must seek approval from the state's legislature in Montgomery to accomplish almost anything including electing school board members, providing for paved roads and sewer systems, and modifying zoning regulations. According to Flynt, the laws restricting home-rule were partly a response to the populist black and working-class rebellions of the late-nineteenth and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These restrictions continue to concentrate power stubbornly in the hands of Alabama's most privileged and well-connected citizens. In the 1990s for example, real-estate developers in Mobile County lobbied in Montgomery to oppose local efforts to require paved roads and sewer systems in new housing developments. "As a Consequence," explains Flynt, "during on 12-month period in late 1990s developers constructed 68 substandard roads for 41 private subdivisions. Nor were developers required to grade, drain, or repair roads."<sup>15</sup> Roads and sewerage are of course not the only things that suffer in this inherently anti-democratic social order. Flynt argues that, Alabama's regressive tax, political, and economic structures have resulted in the state being "frequently sued for violations of the constitutional rights of state prisoners, the physically and mentally handicapped, juveniles in protective custody, and

children in foster care programs or public schools.”<sup>16</sup> Flynt’s analysis shows how Alabama’s project of upward redistribution of wealth has origins in the state’s history of slavery and racial subordination. In invoking the travails faced by the state’s “physically and mentally handicapped,” Flynt explicitly identifies disability oppression as an outcome of that history. The presentation of Keller on the quarter as the embodiment of white southern femininity ensconced within a privatized domestic sphere thus works well with the reasoning deployed by the timber company spokesperson to justify its taking of resources without recompense to the people of Alabama and illustrates perfectly the civic logic of industrial capitalism and contemporary neoliberalism.

Responsibility for the “political” belongs mostly to workers whom International Paper “expects” to be “active in their own communities” despite its own self-serving acquiescence to a system that makes such engagement challenging at best and a futile effort at worst. International Paper meanwhile, is constructed as both outside of the community and as apolitical. Its \$300,000 in charitable contributions are touted as proof of its civic mindedness and benevolence while its status as technically “outside” the realm of Alabama’s civic life signaled by the phrase “their communities” allows for its economic exploitation of the region and the millions lost in unpaid tax revenue each year to go unmentioned. The figure of “4,607” workers belies the thousands of potential jobs lost by International Paper’s domination of local resources while rendering its role in creating and sustaining monopolistic practices through the force of state law completely invisible. The coin itself helps to facilitate these erasures by presenting a white racial heteronormative image of Keller that ignores here criticisms of, and resistance to, racial, gender, and economic inequality.

For instance, long before neoliberalism emerged in the lexicon of modern economics, the real Helen Keller understood that the concentration of resources and power in the hands of a few meant economic and social disenfranchisement for the many. In an article in *Ziegler Magazine for the Blind* she wrote:

The means of employment—the land, and the factories, that is, the tools of labor—are in the hands of a minority of people, and are used rather with a view to increasing the owner’s profits than with a view to keeping all men busy and productive.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, ironically, as I tried to show, the cultural logics that undergird and sustain such destructive economic processes are embodied and conveyed by the central image of Helen Keller on Alabama’s state quarter. As disability studies scholar and activist Liz Crow has noted, Keller’s “image of resilience and courage serves the status quo.” Crow continues:

The image was, and still is, used to uphold the myth of personal striving—it is the same message from my childhood: an individual, determined enough, can do anything; if Helen Keller succeeded, and against such odds, there can be no excuse. In schools, especially in the United States, Helen Keller is still regularly a subject for class work and the message is explicit: ‘students will forever understand that there is no obstacle so big that it cannot be overcome.’<sup>18</sup>

As Crow’s personal insights and experience with the pedagogy of Helen Keller suggest, using Keller’s popular “image” to serve the “status quo” requires more than just eliding her radical class-based politics by cloaking her in the iconography of capital and personal achievement, it also means evacuating the causes, consequences, and lived experience of her disability. As numerous Keller scholars and biographers including Crow have shown, long before the social model of disability had a name, Helen Keller publicized the links between social and economic conditions and impairment. And, though she never developed what could be called in modern terms a “disability rights consciousness,” Keller apparently grasped, to a significant degree, the interlocking character of multiple oppressions. Within

the American Foundation for the Blind and before state legislatures for instance, she consistently lobbied for the specific needs of not only the deaf-blind, but also the particular interests of disabled African-Americans.<sup>19</sup> In 1916, Keller, the daughter of a former Confederate officer and newspaper publisher, publically admitted that “ever since childhood, my sympathies have been with the slaves.” Keller’s family had once owned slaves and, though the Civil War significantly diminished the family’s wealth, their social standing as a respectable genteel family remained largely intact along with an attachment to many of the dubious ideals of the Antebellum South. Keller biographer Dorothy Herrmann describes the family patriarch Captain Author Keller as “a loyal southerner,” who “believed all things southern were noble, and that Negroes, although he would never be deliberately unkind to them, were not human beings.”<sup>20</sup> In this context, Keller’s public support for black civil rights becomes all the more remarkable. Keller once sent a check to the NAACP along with an impassioned letter that described her support for the organization in both religious and class-based terms while locating her empathy for black Americans within her own experience as a native Southerner. Keller wrote:

The outrages against colored people are a denial of Christ. The central fire of his teachings is equality. His gospel proclaims in unequivocal terms that the souls of all men are alike before God. Yet there are persons calling themselves Christians who profit from the economic degradation of their colored fellow-countrymen. Ashamed in my very soul I behold in my own beloved southland the tears of those who are oppressed, those who must bring up their sons and daughters in bondage to be servants, because others have their fields and vineyards, and on the side of the oppressor is power.<sup>21</sup>

When an influential southerner learned of Keller’s support for the NAACP he arranged to have her letter reprinted in a Selma, Alabama newspaper and then accused Keller of disloyalty to her fellow white Southerners and being duped by her Northern teachers. “The

people who did such wonderful work in training Miss Keller,” he wrote, “must have belonged to the old Abolition Gang for they seem to have thoroughly poisoned her mind against her own people.”<sup>22</sup> Visitors to the Keller home and museum in Tuscumbia, Alabama learn nothing of her radical politics or her support for civil rights. The small cottage behind the Keller home is noted as Keller’s birthplace and as the structure in which Anne Sullivan began her intensive tutelage of the young deaf-blind girl. The thought that this austere, dirt-floored structure also once served to house the family’s slaves has doubtless crossed the minds of many visitors including this one. But tour brochures and the kind and earnest docents guiding visitors through the home offer little hint of plantation life on the modest estate prior to the Helen Keller’s 1880 arrival. Whether or not this structure actually once housed slaves before the Civil War, their presence on the Keller estate in the decades before Keller and her parents lived there is never broached. Originally built in 1820 by Keller’s grandparents, brochures proudly boast that “Having survived the ravages of the Civil War, Ivy Green is maintained to the smallest detail in its original state.”<sup>23</sup> The brochure goes on to explain that “Originally, the small “annex” was an office for maintaining the plantation books.”<sup>24</sup> The economic logics of exploitation and degradation so central to Keller’s understanding of both disability and oppression are similarly occluded or erased utterly in the State of Alabama’s appropriation of her on its quarter. The fact that the Keller statue I examine in the next section of this chapter replaced a Confederate General named Jabez Curry further underscores how Alabama’s heteronormative presentations of Keller work to eclipse Alabama’s history of inequality and racial and gendered subordination. Rather than becoming an occasion to contemplate and critique that history while understanding its influence on the present as Keller did, the Keller statue becomes a moment in which



Alabama's history of inequity is remembered as "past" and no longer operative. Just as Keller "overcomes" her disabilities in the coin and statue, Alabama is said to "overcome" its past of racial, gender, and economic inequality.

Indeed, even as Alabama sought to honor its famous disabled daughter Helen Keller with its 2003 coin, the state remained at the center of an ongoing fight over whether or not to preserve the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. In October of 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a case Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer has called "one of the most important civil rights cases of the new millennium."<sup>25</sup> *University of Alabama at Birmingham Board of Trustees, et al. v. Patricia Garrett* involved a nurse at the University of Alabama Birmingham who underwent extensive chemotherapy and radiation treatments for over a year after being diagnosed with breast cancer in 1994. She took only four months leave from work, but upon her return, was demoted and given a significantly lower salary. Patricia Garrett filed a federal law suit against her employer, the state of Alabama, arguing, in part, that the state's leading university for medical treatment and research had discriminated against her throughout her treatment by repeatedly threatening to transfer or replace her. A federal district court consolidated Garrett's case with a similar one, *Ash v. Alabama Department of Youth Services*. The judge then dismissed both on summary judgment, arguing that the Eleventh Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted states sovereign immunity. The ruling effectively declared states immune from ADA, voiding the legal protections afforded to disabled Alabamians since 1990.<sup>26</sup> The Supreme Court's decision to hear the Garrett/Ash case mobilized disability rights activists and civil rights groups who argued that the ADA was an appropriate exercise of Congressional authority to remedy past discrimination and enforce the Constitution's Equal Protection Clause. Indeed, the more than

13 House and Senate hearings held on ADA prior to its enactment found a lengthy history of discrimination in every state. Congress concluded that disabled persons endure daily “the most extreme isolation, unemployment, poverty, psychological abuse and physical deprivation experienced by any segment of our society.”<sup>27</sup>

Among the most comprehensive briefs filed before the Supreme Court in support of *Garrett and Ash* was one filed by Alabama’s Southern Poverty Law Center which detailed the state’s egregious history of disability oppression, discrimination, and human rights’ violations. The brief showed the State of Alabama systematically discriminated against its disabled citizens in employment, housing, practices of forced sterilization, and the denial of the right of the disabled to marry and adopt or bare children. Moreover, according to the brief, disabled Alabamians were denied equal access to vote, to the courts, and to travel. Alabama state law created an entire class of individuals defined as “mental inferiors, deficient, or feeble-minded” and deemed, apparently, unworthy of the rights of citizenship granted others.”<sup>28</sup>

In its 5-4 decision, the court ruled against the plaintiffs, but limited the implications of its ruling specifically to public employees. Chief Justice Rehnquist delivered the majority opinion, arguing that the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment did not require states to provide special accommodations to disabled employees, provided the state’s actions toward such individuals were “rational.”<sup>29</sup> In a further baffling twist of insidious neoliberal logic, the opinion stated that because the Congressional record focused primarily on discrimination of disabled employees in the private sector, evidence presented in the *Ash and Garrett* cases showing disability discrimination against public employees fell “far short of even suggesting a pattern of unconstitutional discrimination.”<sup>30</sup> The *Garrett and Ash* cases demonstrate conclusively

that Alabama's love for Helen Keller did not necessarily extend to other disabled citizens. Its use of Helen Keller on the state's quarter served purely a pedagogical function, one that emphasized the "lessons" of disability as something to be overcome through individual will rather than collective struggle or active redress of systematic social, political, and economic disenfranchisement for the disabled. Keller's inclusion as a beloved daughter/citizen is thus predicated on the silencing of her social justice politics and the casting of Keller herself in the romantic role of a southern spinster bedecked and muted amidst the gothic splendor of scented pine trees and tamed, aristocratic and domesticated camellias.

At the same time, Alabama's inclusion within the larger nation-state remains reliant on its role as a bastion of economic exploitation in which its actions toward workers and citizens alike constitute, in Justice Rehnquist's chilling words, "rational" moves towards securing profits for powerful corporations. For many, Keller remains an ironic choice to represent a state with such a regressive history of racial, gender, class, and disability discrimination. Yet, had Governor Siegelman been truly serious about deploying Keller to exemplify the theme "Education: Link to the Past, Gateway to the Future," he might have noted the ways in which Keller exemplified black and white Alabamian's consistent resistance to the state's discriminatory legacy. He might have celebrated the "Spirit of Justice" she repeatedly enjoined while presenting her as an embodiment of the civic values of active, and truly courageous, political engagement that made the state the birthplace of the nation's struggle for civil rights. Instead, the "spirit of courage" stressed by the state and its coin is completely unmoored from any sense of the social and political struggle that defined the state's transformational history and that Keller herself longed to play a productive and

meaningful part in. But, as Keller often reminded audiences “People do not like to think. If one thinks, one must reach conclusions. Conclusions are not always pleasant.”<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, as educational theorist and prominent critic of neoliberalism Henry Giroux has shown, state-sanctioned pedagogies and educational strategies typically support the dominant culture and class. Schools, teachers, and pedagogical practices, Giroux maintains, labor to teach lessons that stress the “social grammar” of acculturation to the interests of power. In his book *Public Spaces, Private Lives*, Giroux specifically addresses the ways in which neoliberal ideologies frame contemporary educational practices. Giroux explains:

We live in a time when the forces and advocates of neoliberalism not only undermine all attempts to revive the culture of politics as an ethical response to the demise of democratic public life, but also aggressively wage a war against the very possibility of creating noncommodified public spheres and forums that provide the conditions for critical education, linking learning to social change, political agency to the defense of public goods, and intellectual courage to the refusal to surrender knowledge to the highest bidder. Understood as both a set of economic policies and an impoverished notion of citizenship, neoliberalism represents not just a series of market-driven programs but also a coherent set of cultural, political, and educational practices.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout her life, Helen Keller was fascinated by the “culture of politics.” She considered herself a professional writer and activist and repeatedly emphasized the ways in which her education and experience provided the basis for her social justice-oriented political and civic agency. Yet, the state-sponsored “lessons” of Keller’s life offered by Alabama actually de-link learning and social change and define “courage” only in terms of Keller’s ability to conform to social expectations despite the multiple disabilities that called into question the validity of those expectations.

I have at illustrated how Alabama’s use of Keller on its commemorative quarter narrates a heteronormative history of her that not only erases her social justice activism, but,

in so doing, attempts to naturalize the present-day neoliberal order by presenting her as a docile citizen-subject and pedagogical lesson in “overcoming” difficult circumstances rather than challenging or calling into question the social and political conditions that often make circumstances difficult for those least able to meet raced, gendered, nondisabled heteronormative standards of social and economic value. In this next section, I turn to the Keller statue and the counter-narratives of the image of Keller presented by that statue in order to show how heteronormative expectations about Keller’s gender and disability are essential to the construction of her normalizing image.

### **“Miracle” at the Water Pump**

In October of 2009, more than 400 dignitaries, politicians, reporters, and advocates for the blind, deaf, and disabled crowded into the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol to witness the unveiling of the newest contribution to the Capitol’s Statuary Hall Collection. Each of the 50 states is allowed to gift two statues to the collection to represent its people and history to visitors from around the nation and the world. The statues were once permanent fixtures in the Capitol building. But a 1996 law now allowed for statues to be replaced every ten years. Alabama was among the first to lobby Congress to replace one of its statues. And, after a long campaign led by the state’s Republican Governor Bob Riley and his wife Patsy, Alabama succeeded in replacing a statue of a former confederate officer named Jabez Curry with a bronze statue depicting its most famous resident, Helen Keller. Once well-known as an advocate for free public education, Curry had long faded into historical obscurity. More than 40 years after her death however, Helen Keller remained a beloved and recognizable figure, internationally renowned for having overcome multiple disabilities to become the world’s most prominent and successful advocate for the blind and disabled. In 1999, *Time*

magazine had named her one of the 100 most important figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup> Her image had already been placed on a U.S. postage stamp and, of course, on a commemorative quarter by her home state of Alabama. Now, a ½ ton 8 foot tall bronze statue with a base of Alabama marble showing a 7 seven-year old girl fixed in amazement at a water pump become the first statue in the U.S. Capitol to feature either a disabled person or a child.

Carl Augusto, President of the American Foundation for the Blind where Keller worked from 1924 until her retirement from public life in 1960, was among the first to touch the statue. Mary Orndorff of the *Birmingham News* reported the scene to Alabama readers. “After scanning parts of it with his hands, Carl Augusto declared it [the statue] a success.”<sup>34</sup> Augusto told reporters: “I felt the water pump and her hand. It was just wonderful, to have a child and a person with a disability all wrapped into one. It was a wonderful feeling and obviously the statue is beautifully done; it was generous to feel; and the symbolism was magnetic.”<sup>35</sup> Orndorff explained to readers that Augusto’s poignant encounter with the statue was “exactly the kind of tactile experience Alabama officials were hoping for when they battled critics who initially thought the Keller statue should be of her rigidly posed in adulthood as an accomplished internationally known author and activist.”<sup>36</sup> Instead, the statue depicts Keller as a child wearing a neatly tied, unwrinkled dress and bows in her carefully combed hair. Executive Director of Alabama’s State Council on the Arts Albert B. Head told the *The Birmingham News* that the decision to depict Keller as comely child was deliberate and strategic. Head acknowledged that the image of Keller presented in the statue likely did not reflect the reality of Keller’s early life as rural Alabama farm girl in 1887, “especially,” *The Birmingham News* noted “one struggling to communicate with the world around her.”<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, members of the Helen Keller Statue and Artist Selection

Committee believed that an aesthetically appealing and familiar image of Keller was necessary to draw a broad public audience. As Head explained:

She was a bit of a wild young girl, but this is a flattering piece. It's more of a classical style. A purist could have depicted her in a much more raggedy kind of way. But I think it's a very publically accessible image and piece and will ring true to the image most people have of Helen Keller as a child.<sup>38</sup>

According to Head, depiction of Keller's eyes was another point of focus and discussion for sculpture Edward Hlavka and the statue committee. Head explained that although the committee understood the value of portraying Keller's blindness, members also wanted to present the young Keller at her "dignified best." Incapable of focus, Keller's eyes as a child, Head explained, had been "a bit grotesque."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, until she had both eyes replaced with artificial glass one's as a young women, Keller was never photographed face forward so that audiences would not see her apparent departure from able-bodied norms.

The committee's concern for presenting Keller at her "dignified best" and their choice to adopt the iconic and instantly recognizable image of her as a child at the water pump suggest that normative standards of gender, sexuality, and ability profoundly influenced the aesthetic choices of its members. Historian, feminist, and Deaf studies scholar Susan Burch has shown for example how cultural standards of feminine beauty profoundly shaped the public presentation of deaf women in the early to mid-twentieth century. Deaf beauty pageants for instance, consistently linked standards of beauty and appearance with notions of "normality." Historians of the eugenics movement such as Martin Pernick have also shown how the eugenics movement decisively linked beauty to good health and intelligence. The visual and aesthetic choices of the Keller statue committee thus, in turn, decisively shape the histories and knowledges of Keller's life produced by the statue. For instance, Keller's own

investments in presenting an appealing public image are both enacted and naturalized in the statue, thus occluding the historical formation and cultural-ascription of standards of beauty and ability.

At the same time, the committee's desire to create a tactile experience that would render the statue accessible to the blind suggests an awareness that the statue could make possible other kinds of aesthetic experiences and knowledges not discernable in the visual field. In this section I consider the knowledges and histories produced by the Keller statue. I begin with an examination of the abled-bodied and gendered normativities and historical elisions fostered by the statue's visual depiction of Keller as a child. I then move to an exploration of the non-normative knowledges and histories the statue might allow; paying particular attention to the ways in which non-visual representation can productively complicate dominant, heteronormative readings of the statue. I then move to the concluding section of this chapter where I offer an analysis of writer David Underhill's 2009 satirical retelling of the Keller's statue's unveiling in order to underscore how readings of the Keller statue are structured, not only by normative assumptions about gender, sex, and ability, but also by the state and market imperatives in the neoliberal era.

### **Beautiful though Disabled**

In his work on the role and function of disability in modern art Disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers posits that notions of an idealized "classical" human form have historically served to symbolically disqualify disabled persons from full inclusion in the "human" family. Siebers takes up Fredric Jameson's notion of the "political unconscious" to consider the ways in which the political unconscious behind classical forms of the human body have subtly but powerfully labored to regulate community representations. Siebers



then calls for an “aesthetics of human disqualification” which focuses on how ideas about appearance contribute to myriad forms of oppression, especially for the disabled. Such an aesthetics of disqualification, Siebers contends, should further clarify and critique the ways in which bodies are disqualified, that is, Siebers explains, “how they are found lacking, inept, incompetent, inferior, in need, incapable, degenerate, uneducated, weak, ugly, underdeveloped, diseased, immature, unskilled, frail, uncivilized, degenerate, and so on.”<sup>40</sup> Siebers contends that the erasure of disability from public art in particular has long served to allay social anxieties about non-normative bodies and difference while forging the terms of their inclusion/exclusion from the social sphere.

Siebers’ analysis of the “aesthetics of human disqualification” suggests that the Helen Keller Statue Committee’s focus on creating a Keller whose messy and “grotesque” features are minimized works to disqualify the visibly disabled from entrance into the realm of Alabama’s public culture and history. Keller is celebrated only when the perceived “ugliness” of her disability is erased. Indeed, Keller biographers from Joseph Lash to Kim Nielson consistently note Keller’s youthful beauty and comeliness as an important factor in her rise to fame and public acceptance. Keller was not the first deaf-blind girl to be educated. But she was the first to graduate college and to communicate through multiple means including written language. She also had “star quality” and was, by many accounts, intellectually gifted. Hence, my tour of Keller’s childhood home in Tuscumbia, AL began with the docent self-deprecatingly noting Keller’s beauty and intelligence and relating that her IQ was once assessed at around 168. Keller’s ability to read, write, and speak are also touted in tour as important markers of her humanity. Yet, as Dorothy Herrmann and others

have suggested, Keller never really learned to speak coherently to audiences and, to the end of her life, regretted this perceived failure.<sup>41</sup>

The statue does much more than render Keller's disabilities invisible. It also erases the histories and knowledges that might accrue from an explicit acknowledgement of those disabilities. Such histories reveal how disability has been deeply intertwined with structures of gender and heteronormativity and how questions of identity, power, and inclusion/exclusion have been central to the history of people with disabilities. For instance, although Keller developed a keen sense of the social causes of disability (she argued repeatedly that the blind were far more impaired by the prejudices of the sighted than by their lack sight) she also maintained a deep investment in oralism. Oralism is the belief that deaf individuals must be assimilated into hearing society via the elimination of sign language and the institution of oral/speech-based communication and education for the deaf. Keller's close friend Alexander Graham Bell was a leading proponent of oralism. Bell had invented the telephone in search of a device that would help the deaf to hear. A leading advocate of eugenics, Bell believed sign language to a primitive, "subhuman" language. He championed efforts to eradicate sign language and was opposed to marriage between deaf people. Brenda Jo Brueggemann argues that Bell's "positive" eugenics were not only about assimilating the deaf into American culture and society, but about eliminating deaf people. Bell understood that American Sign Language fostered Deaf culture and community and viewed its extinction as central to eliminating deafness as an impairment. As Brueggemann explains:

Bell believed that when deaf people had sign languages to share with each other they were all the more likely to associate with each other and marry. He supposed that deaf children raised orally would be more likely to mix, mingle, and marry in the hearing world, thereby eventually decreasing (if not eradicating) the birth of deaf children.<sup>42</sup>

Promoters of eugenics such as Bell and Samuel Gridley Howe, founder of the Perkins School for the Blind where Keller began her formal education at age nine, believed that people with disabilities might pass on their impairments to their progeny. In so doing, they linked disability, heterosexuality, and normality and health in ways that continue to shape cultural understanding and representations of disability. As Allison Kafer has argued, “The sexuality of people with disabilities is considered always already deviant.” Disabled people are often constructed as undesirable, non-sexual beings, innocent asexuals, or as persons whose “out-of-control” sexuality threatens to reproduce their physical and cognitive difference.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the interdependent relationships and domestic arrangements of people with disabilities regularly defy heteronormative and able-bodied structures of desire, family, and community. Thus, Kafer explains, systems of compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality overlap and are mutually constituted each supporting, sustaining, and naturalizing the other.

Helen Keller was shaped by the particular heteronormative assumptions of her era regarding those with disabilities. She was also influenced by those who sought to shape society through these assumptions. Keller met Alexander Graham Bell at age six after her mother Kate Keller contacted Bell seeking help for her daughter. Keller was raised in the oralist tradition and did not use American Sign Language. She found Bell to be a “wise, warm, and affectionate, friend” and once characterized his oralist methods as “one of the divinest miracles of the nineteenth century.”<sup>44</sup> Keller biographer Kim Nielsen argues that Keller’s investment in oralism was both a product of her circumstances and of-a-piece with her strategy of achieving public influence as a writer and advocate for progressive causes. Distancing herself from the Deaf community, Keller also, at times, embraced the image of

the innocent blind girl. The blind person as seer has been prevalent in Western literary and cultural consciousness for centuries. As James E. Ryan has shown, the figure of the innocent and compelling blind girl became an immensely popular cultural icon in the Victorian era of Helen Keller's youth. Ryan observes that the blind girl serves as both "object of desire and moral exemplar." Building on Ryan's work, Nielsen points out that Keller was widely read in Victorian fiction and in Western literature generally. As such, Keller well understood the cultural power and resonance of the innocent blind girl and used it to her strategic advantage. Noting that Keller sought an "active public life of political and social effectiveness," Nielsen explains:

To forge this public life as an adult, she manipulated of very compelling cultural symbol into a powerful tool—building upon the blind young virginal girl but twisting her profoundly to include an element of political and economic power.<sup>45</sup>

While Nielsen suggests that Keller productively used her disability to "twist" her normative persona in order to advance her social justice agenda, we can also see how a failure to fundamentally challenge that persona has led to its perpetuation in a present-day political and social order that continues to mobilize Keller's sexed and gendered image in support of a heteronormative status quo.

At the same time, the fact to Keller played on her normative images reveals how sexed and gendered stereotypes have historically worked to maintain heteronormative relations of power. The Keller Statue Committee also saw Keller's normative image as "compelling cultural symbol" and "powerful tool" for advancing a politics contrary to Keller's own. Audience appeal and cultural symbolism were also on the minds of committee members when they identified the iconic image of Keller at the pump as the best way to represent Keller to the public. Made famous by William Gibson's 1962 stage and

screenplay, the image offers a story of assimilating physical and cognitive difference. Such stories offer “proof” (as Alexander Graham Bell assumed of the deaf) of the supposedly benign, benevolent, and even “progressive” effects of inclusion and achievement by the disabled in and able-bodied society. Edward Hlavka’s sculpture of Keller would mean that Alabama could make a valuable contribution to the nation’s statuary collection that would speak highly of the quality and spirit of the state’s people and, implicitly, of its modern progressive ambitions in the post-civil rights era. Thus, even as the Keller statue replaced a statue of confederate general representing a war for white supremacy and slavery, the Keller statue itself became a means of denying the on-going legacies of slavery and inequality Alabama by relegating such legacies to a past that, like Keller’s profound disabilities, has now been “overcome.” In addition, rather than aligning Keller with historic and on-going struggles for racial justice, the statue positions her as the white heteronormative citizen-subject presumed to be at the center of Alabama’s history. In this particular sense, the Keller statue is not all that different from the statue of Jabez Curry that preceded it.

Despite this, Keller statue committee chair Joseph Busta presented the Keller statue as a material embodiment of change in Alabama. As Busta explained to the *Florence, Alabama Times Daily* “There are few women represented in Statuary Hall. This will be the first of a child and the first American represented with a disability. That shows the world that something about here in Alabama is different in terms of champions and the abilities of people with disabilities.”<sup>46</sup> But, even as he suggested that the replaced of the Jabez Curry statue with one depicting Keller signaled progressive change, Busta insisted that the “driving force” behind selecting Keller to represent Alabama in Statuary Hall was not her disabilities, but her accomplishments. The state was very proud that Keller would be the first person

with disabilities displayed and glad that people with disabilities might be able to connect with that. But, “Keller was a person we wanted to represent Alabama because of her achievement.” Keller is the most famous disabled person in the world, Busta explained, not because she was disabled, but because she overcame her disabilities.<sup>47</sup>

Gibson’s iconography casts in Bronze by Hlavka presents Keller as the embodiment of normative assimilation and accomplishment and is immediately familiar to audiences. From a queer and disability studies perspective however, the trope of inspirational conformity offered by the statue constitutes a form of normative aggression towards difference at the heart of disability oppression and marginalization. That Alabama officials at once took pride in presenting the statue as one that honored the state’s tolerance towards difference in the post-civil rights era and sought to visually and discursively disavow that disability, illustrates how heteronormativity, rather than simple intolerance or bigotry, works to perpetuate conditions of oppression and violence and also shows how disability is marshaled to masks that violence when it is offered as evidence that “progress” has changed things.

In claiming the mantle of disability inclusion through Keller and then refuting the political, cultural, and historical significance of Keller’s disabilities, Alabama officials also perpetuated a medical model of disability as a departure from the norm be admirably overcome or courageously corrected. As Georgina Kleege observes in the first of her “Letters” to Helen Keller, Keller’s popular life story not only sets an impossible standard of normativity for disabled women, it also enacts the medical model of disability as an affliction to be heroically conquered or cured, rather than a social and cultural construction that can be altered through collective action. Kleege’s work of creative non-fiction *Blind Rage: Letters*

to *Helen Keller*, also reveals another way in which theories of queer disability studies might be productively applied to cultural narratives of Keller that attempt to challenge Keller's regularizing image but do so in ways that nonetheless continue to privilege heteronormativity. Kleege identifies herself to Keller as a "heterosexual middle-class woman."<sup>48</sup> Kleege's feminist analysis of Keller's innocent blind girl persona suggests that Keller's saint-like image not only rendered her as non-threatening to eugenicist like Alexander Graham Bell, it also served to deny blind woman like Kleege a sexual life and entry in to heterosexual privilege. Just as Bell and other eugenicists might have wanted it, Kleege understands the Keller myth as one that denies and suppresses disabled women's sexuality, leaving that sexuality open to exploitation and regulation. Kleege's critique of the Keller persona thus exposes the links between normativity, disability, and sexuality. But at the same time Kleege's insistence on granting Keller the sexual persona denied her by a heteronormative public imaginary reveals an investment in heterosexuality that reifies that imaginary in significant ways.

In a series of letters, Kleege takes on the topic of Keller's sexuality at length. Kleege begins these letters by questioning the popular assumption that Keller had no sex life. "It's a myth a lot of people work hard to preserve," Kleege notes. "Why, Helen?" Kleege continues, "Why is the idea of your sexuality so threatening." Kleege answers by positing one possibility from which many others pertinent to bodily and social regulation might follow:

One comes from the impulse to make you a saint. Since blindness, deafness, and other impairments have traditionally been associated with sin, to make yourself admirable, you had to promote the notion of absolute purity. But there are issues, and even you must recognize that the price of sainthood is steep.<sup>49</sup>

The association between disability and sexual sin noted by Kleege suggests that the impulse to manage and police sexuality is foundational to Keller's mythologized public façade. Moreover, as Kleege points out, this impulse toward sexual regulation was not only fully operational in Keller's own time, but indeed Keller herself is credibly positioned here by Kleege as being compelled to create a regime of sexual repression and self-regulation as the price of her admission into American public life. After noting that "every human being has a sex life" and that, though the form it takes may vary, "it's a part of being human," Kleege imagines a series of childhood moments of discovery very different from Helen's discovery of language at the water pump. Drawing on a number of biographical accounts (including apparently Dorothy Herrmann's) which noted that Helen displayed a curiosity about gender differences, birth, and sexuality typical of most children, Kleege reminds Helen that Annie Sullivan was known to have been direct and forthright with her regarding such questions from a young age. Kleege writes:

Sometime later, she (Sullivan) might have named all of the parts of your body, being careful to tell you that some of these were words you should not use in public. You promised to keep these words secret, but since you were on the subject, you might have felt inclined to tell her that sometimes when you touched yourself there (spelling the new word with one hand and pointing with the other) it felt sort of funny but also sort of good. And she told you that such feeling were perfectly natural, perfectly alright to have. But I'm guessing this is a conversation you never had. I can't assume that both of you were so in advance of your times about everything. More likely, she caught you at it one day, and told you not to do it, but didn't tell you why. And she told you in a way that was so adamant and cryptic that you knew not to ask.<sup>50</sup>

Kleege then quotes a letter from an eight-year old Helen written to her mother in which the young Helen expresses delight and having been kissed by several boys at a birthday party. "I don't know," Kleege intones, "this sounds a bit boy crazy to me. Anything else go on with those boys who were not shy?...Ever play doctor Helen?"<sup>51</sup>



Kleege is unflinchingly and deliberately frank in her consideration of Keller's sexual life. In the letters that follow this one, she considers the vulnerabilities an adolescent Helen might have faced from "Tuscumbia boys" and other men and boys looking to take advantage of the comely young woman. She wonders about the sleeping arrangements of an adult Helen who once shared her home with Annie Sullivan's husband the noted socialist and radical John Macy and then with a series of women throughout her life. Kleege attempts to ground her postulations about Keller's sexual life within credible realities that the real Helen Keller might well have confronted. The ordinary and pervasive childhood curiosities documented by her biographers, the horrid but real possibility of coerced sexual exploitation and subordination by able-bodied guardians or superiors (a historical and on-going reality for persons with disabilities), the human desires of an adult woman facing a cold and empty bed; these scenarios attempt to place Keller's sexual life within a social, political, and personal sphere familiar to disabled audiences. In the process, Kleege not only humanizes Keller, but also forces her readers to confront the fact that the saintly image of Keller is a culturally constructed narrative designed to avoid the queasy and complicated truths of disabled women's lived experience.

Such truths of course, are precisely the point, since they draw us away from the fabrications of cultural myth and meaning making and compel a consideration of why, and how, we engage in such myth-making in the first place. Beyond the (obvious to some) functions of maintaining a strident social order founded on the suppression of a presumptive sexual chaos, rests the perhaps less apparent but interlocking political function of both constraining and *controlling* the sexuality of disabled people. The myth of the sexless saint clears the way for the sexual objectification and exploitation of its subject (in this case

Keller) since it deprives her of her full humanity and sexuality while also attempting to foreclose the very real material and socio-political dimensions (being subjugated to caretakers and largely male “experts” for instance) of living as a disabled woman in American society.

But, from a queer disability studies perspective, Kleege’s heterosexual recovery narrative also replicates and varies as “natural” certain heteronormative assumptions about sexuality that continue to haunt and normatively regulate people with disabilities. Kleege’s insistence that “everyone has a sex life” not only forecloses the possibility that Keller was asexual or that she experienced intimacy, love, and fulfillment in ways that were not sexual, but also establishes *heterosexual* activity as a prerequisite to Keller’s humanity. In his ground-breaking examination of sex education literature for the blind, Patrick White illustrates how organizations such as the American Foundation Blind (for whom Helen Keller was the chief spokesperson throughout her adult life) have been complicit “with the regime of compulsory heterosexuality and the normalization of difference.”<sup>52</sup>

For instance, according to White, a central concern among sex educators of the blind in the 1970s and 80s was that blind youth “were not heterosexual enough.” A history of institutional, social, and gendered segregation for the blind (state schools for blind often separated the sexes) meant that blind and visually impaired youth needed to be assimilated to heteronormative standards of “healthy” social and sexual interaction. Thus, the American Foundation for the Blind’s 1975 *Sex Education and Family Life for Visually Handicapped Children and Youth* explicitly stressed the need for blind young people to embrace heterosexual relationships in order to “leave the ‘blind world’ behind” and “share fully the humanness of all human beings.” Such assertions, observes White, assume that “only by

having their sexuality assimilated and regulated can the blind become fully human.”<sup>53</sup> For White, distress about the supposed failure of blind youth to conform succinctly to heterosexual social norms is part of what makes them “queer.”<sup>54</sup> Additionally, White concludes that a key aspect of “the crises in heterosexuality” that emerges from a consideration of the sexuality of the blind is that blindness fundamentally calls into question the presumed links between the visual field and heterosexual attraction. “If the blind are primarily attracted to ‘personality,’ it suddenly seems ludicrous to demand that their sexual desires should display the same degree of gender conformity as those of sighted heterosexuals.”<sup>54</sup>

White’s work thus draws critical attention to the links between cultural representations of Keller, the maintenance of heterosexual norms and perspectives, and the drive to normalize and erase disability. As Sarah Chinn notes of Keller’s widely held public persona “The popular, sentimental, melodramatic image of Helen Keller the wild child transformed into a docile girl by the civilizing influence of female devotion,” illustrates how the lives, histories, and experiences of people with disabilities have “invariably been filtered through the lens of heterosexuality.”<sup>55</sup>

While White shows how discourses of blind sexuality are embedded within a “heterosexual matrix” that refuses to acknowledge physical, cognitive, and sexual heterogeneity, Chinn’s observations suggest that the popular image of Keller cannot be disaggregated from dominant heteronormative cultural assumptions about gender and disability. Queer disability studies perspectives thus allow us to attend, not only to the ways in which Alabama’s use of Keller’s public image and accounts of her life for public audiences were shaped by both normative standards of gender and ability, but also disability

perspectives such as Kleege's can perpetuate historic, cultural, and institutional efforts to "manage" disability and its non-normative dimensions when heterosexuality fails to be interrogated as a means of regulating disabled people and is uncritically championed as a means of achieving their "humanity."

In her real life of course, Keller was aware of how heteropatriarchal expectations of sex and gender served to regulate women. For instance, from a disability perspective, it is not at all surprising that the adult Helen Keller was an out-spoken advocate not just women's political rights (the right to vote), but also for their sexual rights (the right to access birth control), and for their equal pay and equal access to education. Indeed, the real Helen Keller construed political and sexual rights as interconnected. Writing in the pages of *The Call*, Keller welcomed the formation of a national women's political party with the observation: "Women have discovered they cannot rely on the man's chivalry to bring them justice-just as men before them found out that we cannot be saved by other people-we must save ourselves."<sup>56</sup> Here Keller stripes away the sexed and gendered patina of "chivalry" employed to justify women's subordination and gestures toward the wide range of social and political freedoms necessary to secure women's independence. Among these freedoms, Keller suggests, is salvation from the stultifying effects of male/female knight/lady binaries.

In her 2009 satirical short-film "Annie Dearest," queer writer, performer, and filmmaker Terry Galloway exposes the normative constraints imposed on Keller by her popular image. Whereas Kleege critiques the denial of disabled women's sexuality evinced by Keller's child-like persona, Galloway, deaf since age 9, strongly identified with Keller the out-of-control "wild child"—an image Galloway linked to her own desire to shatter the binary constraints of her gender and disability. In her memoir *Mean Little Deaf Queer*,

Galloway poignantly and humorously relates her first encounter with the Helen Keller of William Gibson's imagination:

I never felt envy until I was almost ten and saw Patty Duke as a deaf-blind Helen Keller in *The Miracle Worker*. That Girl was a sight. Her hair a greasy, matted nest, filth smeared all over her little body, her cotton jumper like the rag of an urchin. Patty as Helen was as ill-willed and determined and narcissistic as I'd ever dreamed of being, and bored into a spitting mad whirlwind. She was one nasty cookie, and I knew I had it in me to be just like her. Playing Helen Keller became my private game. Taking off my hearing aids and glasses and letting the inner me rip.<sup>57</sup>

Galloway then connects this desire for transgression that Patty Duke's Helen unleashed in her with her own sexual longings and desire for validation.

In my mind Annie didn't look like her Anne Bancroft but like all the older girls I'd ever had a crush on. And if I finally got the connection between the word "wah-wah" and the stuff running over and between my fingers, the prize would be mine-their sympathetic attention to my terrible handicap and their awed admiration for my wounded but undaunted soul. The answer to my bubbling desire, and a way to be both hero and saved.<sup>58</sup>

While, for Georgina Kleege, the Keller myth was a static and deadening dictate to conform to a ridiculous standard, for Galloway, the cinematic image and construction of a young Keller forged a spectrum of transgressive possibility. At the same time however, Galloway's short film "Annie Dearest" uses dark humor to point out the ways in which physical and cognitive difference, as well as bodily transgression, is aggressively and punitively suppressed. The film spoofs the 1962 film *The Miracle Worker*. In it, Galloway satirically envisions how a young Helen Keller might have been taught to communicate by a less than patient Annie Sullivan.

Shot in black and white, closed-captioning is deployed as an instrument of parody as parenthetical subtitles in all caps cue viewers to the farcical aspects of the original film through textual representations of sound: (INCREDIBLY MOVING MUSIC),

(SORROWFUL ORCHESTRAL CRESCENDO). Galloway plays the role of Annie. Absurdly overbearing and abusive, Annie is determined to subdue an impossible young Helen, a girl so out of touch she is seen to nearly suffocate in a twist of sheets drying on a clothesline. In one early scene, Annie is depicted at the kitchen table force-feeding young Helen mashed potatoes. In Galloway's version of the *Miracle Worker*, Annie also goes to outrageous lengths to "awaken" the young Helen to the "miracle" of language by having her connect the substance of water with the word. A pitcher of water is poured on Helen's head, she is dunked into a toilet (GURGLING SOUNDS), kicked by Annie into a river clearly labeled for viewers as a toxic waste dump, and sent tumbling across her lawn by the massive pressure of a fire hose wielded by Annie. Finally, when Annie's ridiculous over use of the iconic backyard water pump fails to yield results, Helen is tied and locked in an outdoor shed where she endures a form of water torture until relenting and forming the word W-A-T-E-R to the strains of (SICKENINGLY SWEET MUSIC).<sup>59</sup> An ebullient Annie is then shown embracing Helen and kissing her on the cheek (LIP SMACKING). The film ends with Annie beginning a new lesson for Helen. Holding up a wire coat hanger to the camera, Galloway, in her role as Annie, stares into the camera. "Now," says Annie, drawing out the word "now" for melodramatic affect, "WI-RE HAN-GER.!!!" The music grows whimsically ominous (TERRIFYING MUSIC). As the frame freezes on Helen and Annie, text alerts viewers "Coming Soon Episode 2...Annie Dearest The Only Way They Learn" The words "Annie Dearest" are animated in blood red and appear to ooze down the screen in a manner identical to the opening title shot from the film "The Rocky Horror Picture Show." The reference to "Rocky Horror" here is likely not incidental. The 1975 cult classic from director Jim Sharman depicts a young, newly engaged and ostensibly "straight" couple who must pay a

visit to the bizarre and very queer home of Dr. Frank-N-Furter when their car breaks down in an isolated area. Galloway's film likewise pokes fun at heteronormative "horror show" fears of difference and transgression.

"Annie Dearest" thus combines elements of slap-stick parody and camp with more sinister overtones of torment and forced social conformity and physical coercion. Galloway simultaneously lampoons able-bodied assumptions about the limitations of people with disabilities (the young Helen is rendered totally incompetent without the guiding hand of Annie) and sardonically critiques the violence entailed in efforts to assimilate and control physical and cognitive differences. The scene in which Annie turns a fire hose upon Helen, for instance, at once conjures images of the black freedom struggle against southern segregation and utilizes comic high-speed shots that depict Helen being tossed around by the water in a visual sequence evocative of the silent era comedies of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin (both of whom used physical comedy to address issues of immigrant assimilation while satirizing the alienating effects of a supposedly modern and "rationalist" technocratic society). The pitcher of water poured over Helen's head provokes expressions of pleasure on the girl's face as she gurgles WaWa... WaWa and, at the same time, evinces the uncomfortable imagery of recently uncovered CIA water boarding videos. The coat hanger in the film's closing scene references an iconic sequence in Frank Perry's 1981 film "Mommie Dearest" in which Joan Crawford (played by Faye Dunaway) is portrayed fitfully throwing coat hangers from a closet in an apoplectic rage directed at her ever-recalcitrant and never quite obedient enough children. The coat hanger also emblemizes abortion rights struggles of the late 1960s and early 70s. Recently re-deployed by reproductive rights activists in Texas and elsewhere, the coat hanger symbolizes an era prior to *Roe vs. Wade* when,

compelled by a lack of access to abortion services and appropriate medical care, some women used coat hangers to terminate unwanted pregnancies. Activists often present coat hangers along with the words “Never Again” or “Never Going Back” to signify resistance to efforts by legislators to restrict women’s reproductive choices.

From a queer disability perspective the coat hanger might also be read as an instrument of violence directed at undesirable fetuses. Moreover, as Allison Kafer has shown, a crip/queer analysis productively complicates the rhetoric of “choice” surrounding contemporary struggles over access to abortion. In it is not only that the language of “choice” can easily cover over sterilization abuses, but also, that women’s “choices” about abortion have historically been compromised by racism, classism, ableism, and xenophobia. Discourses of choice and “reproductive freedom” thus “fails to take into account how different women, have different access, to different choices; it removes from analysis the conditions under which woman and families make decisions about reproduction.”<sup>60</sup> Just as Keller sought emphasize the links between reproductive choice and economic opportunities for women, queer and disability studies scholars insist that reproduction is not simply a matter of consumer choice but a question of economic and social justice.

In addition to placing issues of abortion in a disability context, Galloway’s film offers a queer critique of heteronormative notions of matronly care and concern for children. So-called “maternal instincts” are shown to be utterly false. At the same time, the film issues a disability critique of processes of normalization directed at disabled children. The online zine *Disability World* highlighted this last theme. After praising the film as “one of the best disability films of the last five years,” *Disability World* noted that “Galloway and her creative team took about 9 minutes to demolish the myth of the sainted relationship between Helen



Keller and teacher Annie Sullivan; a myth that Galloway feels has inspired but intimidated generations of deaf and hard of hearing children who were force-fed *The Miracle Worker*.”<sup>61</sup>

Galloway’s sense that the popular image of Keller at the water pump both “inspires and intimidates” deaf and hard of hearing children indexes the complex ways in which visual culture works with able-bodied ideologies to interpolate disability and difference and reveals how that interpellation is never quite complete. While Kleege’s response to the Keller statue counteracts a repressive, saintly image that Kleege understands hegemonic and de-humanizing, Galloway’s response to the statue complicates both Kleege’s and Alabama’s representation. This is because Galloway not only suggest how the Keller statue evinces a moment of non-heteronormative intimacy and connection between Keller and Annie Sullivan that inspires within her a moment of queer and disabled identification that Alabama officials likely did not foresee, but also because, is so doing, Galloway’s film challenges Kleege’s assumption that heterosexual expression is a root to liberation for disabled women rather than a path to other forms of regulation and control.

The possibilities for challenging existing social and regulatory norms that disabilities threaten to call into question is precisely what is at stake in cultural productions of Helen Keller in the neoliberal moment. The state of Alabama’s use of the visual field to represent Helen Keller is what allows the state to advance adherence to the status quo by presenting Keller as model of the properly gendered disabled girl/woman who overcomes her deviance to become “normal.” But while the state’s material embodiments of Keller are constrained within, and by, the political and material realm of public presentation, counter narratives of the Keller by cultural producers like Galloway permit a broadening of perspectives and possibilities which call into question the cultural authority of the state while pointing out the

dimensions of the state's regulatory project and to uses of normative understanding of sex and gender to advance that project. The poet Kathy Wolfe offers still a different response Alabama's Keller statue; one that imagines Keller's sensory experiences of disability and her nonvisual means of knowledge reception as a means of both challenging her normalizing persona and of resisting the objectification of visual and popular culture.

Indeed, Wolfe understands Keller's cultural persona as an occasion to call into question notions of a disability identity that attach to particular sexed and gendered embodiments. In this way, Wolfe resists the deployment of heteronormative, able-bodied assumptions about gender and disability at the core of Alabama's normalizing project. While Alabama utilizes the sentimental image of a sweet young girl "overcoming" disability by entering into enlightenment at the water pump and accepting her raced, classed, and gendered position in Alabama's history, Wolfe takes Keller off the normalizing pedestal that Alabama places her own. But while Kleege tares down that pedestal in ways that reproduce able-bodied heteronormative expectations, Wolfe do so in a way that presents Keller's disabilities, not as a source of exile from normativity, but as way to connect with, and understand the world and its history and politics from a non-able-bodied perspective. In addition, while Galloway challenges Alabama's representational frames through a critique of processes of normative regulation that also suggests sexual and social transgression, Wolfe's locates Keller's in an arena beyond expectations of sex and gender that resists altogether the cultural and political uses to which Keller's sexed and gendered persona have been put.

Entitled "Helen Takes the Stage: The Helen Keller Poems," Wolfe's poems invite readers to consider the complexity and nuance of Keller's life and work. Importantly, Wolfe's work privileges the sensual over the visual. She thus displaces the popular image of

Keller, in part, by de-privileging the visual and discursive fields that Wade, Underhill, and others attempt to engage and subvert. Wolfe was among the first to touch the Keller statue at the U.S. Capitol. Wolfe reflected on the experience, noting the statue's tactile power and moving reading away from the miracle child image the statue visualizes. "What I found most inspiring about Helen Keller," Wolfe noted, "isn't the story of her childhood but her passion for and work towards justice and equality for everyone."<sup>62</sup> Wolfe then describes the Helen Keller whose books were burned by Nazis and whose advocacy on behalf of women, workers, African-Americans, and the disabled "should inspire us all to work for justice."<sup>63</sup> A self-identified Lesbian with what she described to readers of the online journal of disability poetry *Wordgathering* as "a disability culture sensibility," Wolfe's poems do more than just explore the hidden history of Keller's life; they call to life a fully-human, complex, and multi-dimensional Helen Keller.<sup>64</sup> In the words of Laurie Lambeth writing in *Disability Studies Quarterly*: "In these pages Keller is intelligent, sensual, religious, compassionate, bitingly witty; she grieves, she refuses to be pigeonholed."<sup>65</sup> "The book," concludes Lambeth, "ultimately privileges a sensual life over a life dominated by sight and sound."<sup>66</sup>

It is Wolfe's privileging of the sensual that, combined with her attention to Keller's political consciousness and an imaginative evocation of Keller's experiences as a public figure both scrutinized and acclaimed, that allows her to create a powerful counter-narrative of Keller that complicates, challenges, and expands the popular image of Keller deployed by her home state in its commemorative coin and statue. Consider, for instance, the title poem of the collection "Helen Takes the Stage" which re-imagines a scene from Keller's brief stint as a Vaudeville performer in the early 1920s.

Here I am, playing, like a well-trained seal for you, between the clowns and singing dogs./Your surprise at seeing me in the flesh in a room smelling of cigars, makes my skin prickle with heat more than the stage lights./Did you know Mark Twain taught me to play pool and spit tobacco?/Annie, my teacher, hates me being here./"It's so undignified to tell jokes to drunks and traveling salesman," she says./I crave applause more than scotch, cigarettes, or hot dogs swimming in mustard./With the knife of language, I carved out the best life an icon can./But, being a saint is as difficult as getting a drink during prohibition./Yet, until the curtain falls, I am tethered, like you, to laughing muck and mire of earth.<sup>67</sup>

Here, Keller's experience of scrutinizing enfreakment and difference (she is like a well-trained seal between clowns and dogs) is rendered in sensual terms and juxtaposed with her desire for fame and attention. Wolfe's Keller experiences both the pleasures and the perilous entrapment of her difference and its construction through the public gaze. She is a mortal human being apotheosized by the de-humanizing glare of on-lookers who nonetheless seeks to control that glare for her own aims and personal fulfillment. In another poem exploring Keller's role as Vaudeville performer, Wolfe appropriates lines from Keller's actual Vaudeville act. Entitled "Q&A," the piece re-appropriates a Keller Vaudeville script to represent Keller as a woman of grace, wit, and political acumen in the face of curious spectators.

What is the greatest obstacle to world peace?/The Human race./What is the slowest thing in the world?/Congress./Do you think women are men's intellectual equals?/God made woman foolish so that she might be a suitable companion to man./Do you desire your sight more than anything else in the world?/No! I would rather walk with a friend in the dark than walk alone in the light.<sup>68</sup>

Placed within the context of Wolfe's "disability culture sensibility," this poem's final lines take aim at the ablest assumption that disabled people long to be able-bodied while at the same time privileging dependence on others as both a social and cultural reality for everyone and a preferred mode of living.

Other poems in the collection highlight Keller's human rights consciousness and radical sensibilities. "The Sun in Warm: Nagasaki, 1948," for example, imagines Keller's post-World War II visit to a devastated Japan. "Twenty-four teachers scorched, teachers decapitated, patients incinerated./And they say America won the war?/I do not want peace that passes understanding; I want understanding that brings peace."<sup>69</sup> Yet another work, one of the few in the collection written from a third-person perspective, imagines a paranoid and embittered J. Edgar Hoover wishing Keller dead. "The commies love your deaf alphabet./With that plaster saint smile on your red lips, you spell commie secrets into your comrades' hands./Damn you, Helen Adams Keller!.../If only that do-gooder teacher hadn't put your hand under that pump./If only you'd been thrown in the river and drowned."<sup>70</sup> The sinister and deep-seeded wish to manage, control, suppress, and ultimately eradicate disabled bodies from American public life is presented here along-side the radicalism and transformational possibility that Keller's disability agency and resistance evinces for a distressed Hoover who, in the course of his long career, sought to suppress and eliminate various kinds of political dissent and radicalism from the American political scene. Likewise, while Alabama's officials labored efficiently to carefully manage the state's material embodiment of Keller so as to make it presentable and appealing to a mass-audience, Wolfe's presentation of Keller here shows that attempts to manage such bodies are not only profoundly political, but also, quite often, emerge out of desire to suppress social difference by doing both literal and metaphorical violence to disabled bodies and to those subjects categorized as aberrant and threatening, not only to white male heterosexual privilege, but also to the social, political, and cultural hegemony of able-bodiedness that underwrites that privilege.

One interesting aspect of Wolfe's work is not the way she resurrects the lost history of Keller's life through poetry, but how she connects that lost history to the larger question of what it means to be disabled in U.S. society. For Wolfe, determined resistance to de-humanization, objectification, and normalizing categorization are a significant part of the answer to that question. In an essay reflecting on her work in the online magazine of media arts and culture *Scene 4*, Wolfe draws explicit connections between her experience of sexual difference and her disability. "Not surprisingly," Wolfe notes in a passage that may indeed strike many as quite surprising, "there are porn sites devoted to Helen Keller." Wolfe continues: "This, too, isn't shocking to folks with disabilities. Keller is one of the most famous people with disabilities and, culturally, we who are disabled are largely viewed as being either a-sexual or as abnormally (fetishistically) sexual."<sup>71</sup> Wolfe then goes on to relate a story common to those of us who've shared our study of Keller's life with others. "Over a dinner with friends in Connecticut", Wolfe relates:

One of the women, who is a Lesbian, when she heard I had written a book of poems about Keller, immediately wanted to know "Did she sleep with Annie Sullivan her teacher? How cool would that have been!" This woman had no interest in Keller's writing(Keller was a prolific author), her politics(Keller was an ACLU co-founder, and opponent of racism among other things), or her disability advocacy. Nope her thoughts went straight(so to speak) to the ultimate dyke fantasy. (I'm a Lesbian and I love dykes. I'm not being anti-queer here). Just sayin': here's a typical example of what we who are disabled, on the street, call crip-porn-of not looking at someone with a disability as a complete human being-of just seeing someone like me as an object on which to project one's fantasies.<sup>72</sup>

As a result, Wolfe tells readers, she "was not overly shocked," to find some of her Keller poems featured on a porn site.<sup>73</sup>

Wolfe's foray into the fascinating world of Helen Keller crip-porn illustrates how the sexual regulation and categorization of bodies positioned as different serves to achieve

multiple and inter-locking aims in American society. As Keller biographer Kim Nielson notes, Helen Keller, like so many prominent and out-spoken American women, was (and obviously remains) frequently the subject of sexual speculation and intrigue. Explains

Nielson:

Gender traditionalists frequently assume that any woman living nontraditional gender roles must also fail to adhere to traditional sexual norms. Opponents of suffragists, feminists, and other female reformers have also often called them lesbians or sexual deviants in order to discredit them and their political ideologies. Fearing the consequences of such accusations, many women have correspondingly curtailed their public activities. The speculations about Keller's sexuality, and the casting of it as abnormal, may simple be another example of this tactic.<sup>74</sup>

Like other biographies of Keller, Nielson's work points out that the available historical evidence suggests that Keller was most likely heterosexual. She was briefly engaged to be married to journalist Peter Fagan until the relationship was abruptly ended by her brother at the family's request, reportedly at the barrel of shotgun, when Fagan attempted to join Keller on a visit to her mother's home in Montgomery, AL. Biographer Dorothy Hermann also notes that Keller's letters and autobiographies suggest a woman who enjoyed the smells and rugged sensual appeal of men over the softer bodily characteristics of the women with whom she spent most of her time. Whatever the historical evidence, rumors of Keller's sexual deviance persist.

Indeed, taken together, the analysis of Wolfe and Nielson suggests that the regulation, objectification, presentation, and differentiation, of disabled bodies in American popular discourse and, by extension perhaps, in American cultural productions of disabled subjects, is both a cultural manifestation of sexual anxiety, and a mark of the desire for sexual transgression. Such differentiation thus becomes a political tactic that maneuvers to construe bodily difference as necessarily a sexual difference threatening an existing social and

political order founded a carefully managed heterosexual supremacy. In this context, the presentation of Keller in her childhood moment of discovery arguably serves to elide not only her political agency, but her sexual agency as well. Presenting Keller in mature womanhood might not only conjure questions about her political agency and public career, but could also raise the specter of her latent sexuality, a move that threatens to allow audiences the possibility of transgressing the saintly and innocent image of Keller in ways that could challenge both the authority of the state and the official state-sanctioned narratives of her life that labor to bolster that authority. Or, conversely, as Wolfe's analysis suggest, could simply reproduce Keller as an objectified sexual fetish reinforcing existing modes of sexual regulation.

What Wolfe's work accomplishes most successfully however, is demonstrating how de-privileging sight and sound can produce new ways and seeing not tied to the able-bodied, heteronormative expectations of gender, sex, and ability that do the normative and objectifying political work described by Nielsen. Rather than suggesting, as Nielsen and Hermmann do, that Keller was "likely" heterosexual, Wolfe shows how Keller's disabilities positioned her as non-normative in ways not necessarily tied to sex or gender. In so doing, Wolfe's work can be seen as challenging Alabama's uses of normative gender expectations to advance a neoliberal agenda. The sun and smells of Nagasaki, the objectifying heat of the Vaudeville spotlight, Keller's taste for scotch and hotdogs, and the recognition that friendship and humanity are not premised on able-bodiedness; all of these serve to connect readers to a sensory experience where representation is dislodged from the image. In the process, Wolfe points to the ways in which we might begin to formulate histories of Keller that don't rely on iconicity and the normativities that adhere to it.



In the first two sections of this chapter, I have shown how Alabama relied upon heteronormative expectations of disability and gender to advance an image of Helen Keller that elided her considerable investments in feminism, anti-racism, and anti-capitalist critique. I have also demonstrated how feminist, queer, and disabled cultural producers have attempted to defy and subvert the normative expectations of Keller's gender and disability that underwrite Alabama's neoliberal deployment of her. In this final section I analyze a "re-presentation" of the Keller statue that demonstrates how modes of gender and racial oppression are tied directly to neoliberal structures of economic and social inequality.

### **Conclusion: Re-Presenting Keller at the Water Pump**

While Kleege and Galloway's representations of Keller point to the normalizing work done by her gendered persona and Wolfe's work eschews that persona to focus on how Keller's experience of disability shaped her perceptions and politics, Alabama journalist and Occupy Wall Street activist David Underhill uses satire to reveal how the normativities imposed upon Keller around her gender and ability are also deeply embedded within political and economic projects that foster and perpetuate social inequality. In his 2009 satirical short story "The Apotheosis of Helen Keller," Underhill re-imagines the unveiling ceremonies at the U.S. Capitol that marked the installment of a statue of Helen Keller in the U.S. Capitol Visitor's Center. In Underhill's fictional version of events, the child statue of Helen Keller becomes possessed by the written and spoken voice of the adult Keller. The story exposes how powerful interests use the Keller myth to not only occlude Keller's own resistance to economic inequality, but to advance and sustain the structures of economic inequality that benefit the powerful.

Underhill's work has been published in magazines such as *The Nation* and the online newsletter *Counterpunch*, a publication that describes itself as "the best muckraking newsletter in the country" specializing in "under-reported, mis-reported, and censored news stories."<sup>75</sup> Underhill moved to Alabama from the Bay Area in the 1960s to cover the Civil Rights Movement for the Montgomery-based newspaper the *Southern Courier*. His story on the Keller statue was published in *The Mobile Bay Times*.

Underhill's story opens by introducing the reader to the U.S. Capitol's Visitor Center where the statue of young Helen waits to be unveiled amid great fanfare the following day. Underhill spatializes the area in which the Keller Statue is housed as both a commercialized space of touristic forgetting and re-remembering, "a subterranean tribute to the overdone," and the place where a heated contest over the meaning of the statue is waged between Keller's determined spirit of resistance and the Orwellian guardians of her modern-day mythic and pacified image.<sup>76</sup> Built as an underground extension of the Capitol itself, the actual Capitol Visitor Center was opened to the public in 2008 and now houses 24 of the statue's in the Capitol's Statuary Hall Collection, including Alabama's Keller statue. The largest project in the history of the U.S. Capitol, groundbreaking on the extension occurred in 2000 with construction commencing, according to the "after a major reassessment of the project following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>."<sup>77</sup> Indeed, the Capitol Visitor's Center website goes on to note that, by Congressional mandate, "Improving the security of Congress, the Capitol, and visitors was one of the fundamental goals driving the construction of the Capitol Visitor Center."<sup>78</sup> In Underhill's story, responsibility for CVC security rests with the diligent Major Owen Stickler, whom we are told, works hours that are

“much too long” under stress that is “much too great” and with “far too little help on his overnight shift since the budget cuts.”<sup>79</sup>

The fact that Stickler works in a facility that, like the real Capitol Visitor’s Center, comes complete with shops, a cafeteria, and movie theatre at a cost of well over half a billion dollars while budget cuts afford him little help over long hours, serves to underscore and subtly critique the neoliberal matrix in which the Keller statue is situated. Meanwhile, Stickler’s co-worker and night-shift foil janitor Mazzie Washington, highlights and resists the de-humanizing effects of power through her critiques of the child-like rendering of Helen Keller in the State of Alabama’s statue. Throughout the story, Washington insists that the statue of Keller is animated by the spirit of a woman determined to assert her full humanity. At first, Stickler condescendingly dismisses her claims. Then, near the end of the story when Stickler finally demands that Washington explain her belief that the bronze statue has been animated and is seeking to warn them both of the Capitol’s impending destruction, he is moved by her poignant reply. Writes Underhill: “while silently asking himself how he’d reached the point of regarding her conversations with a statue as normal events,” Stickler asks Washington “Why do you believe her?” Washington explains in reply:

For one reason, because she means no harm. She just don’t like it when people try to keep her a youngster forever, won’t admit that she was an adult. Whole bunches of folks have done like that before. Boy! Girl! Don’t get uppity! Stay in your place! That was meant to keep colored folks down. We didn’t like it and we finally rose up. Same with her now. You understand Major?<sup>80</sup>

Mazzie Washington’s analysis serves to ground the economic and political power evinced by the structure of the Capitol Visitor Center within the oppression and suppression of Keller’s adulthood. The passage also underscores how processes of gender and racial subordination and oppression are linked under neoliberalism such that Mazzie Washington is able to

identify with Keller on the basis of her own experiences of denigration and being told to “stay in your place.”

As both her critics and supporters did during her life-time, state-sponsored remembrances of Helen Keller in the neoliberal present attempt to circumscribe and manage Keller’s activist identity by apotheosizing both her gender and disability, thus drawing attention away from her political work and foregrounding the meaning of her disability in narratives of personal overcoming and courage that evacuate the collective struggle for justice the real Keller sought to advance as an adult. This apotheosis is, of course, a dominant theme throughout Underhill’s story and he carefully situates the strategic aggrandizement of Keller as child within the contemporary political and economic milieu of U.S. and global neoliberal economic restructuring. Consider for instance, his fictionalized, yet reminiscent of the real, description of Alabama’s Governor at the unveiling ceremonies. Writes Underhill:

Alabama’s Governor had enough of the hair and air of Elvis to romance his core supporters into voting for him. But he’d also been toned down and tidied up enough to put Asian and German industrialists at ease when he went begging them to establish factories where his voters could get a paycheck. And what could advance such purposes better than a media-saturated ceremony for the installation of this statue at the Capitol? Little Helen would show that even the defectives down home could be trained to do things beyond their apparent capacities. This was as an equal blessing for the soul as well as the personnel department.<sup>81</sup>

The newly created jobs referenced by Underhill in auto manufacturing with companies such as Mercedes-Benz and Honda, were predicated on Alabama’s low-wages, cheaper cost of living, and “right-to-work” union-free status. It is not coincidental, for instance, that each of Alabama’s U.S. Senators, Richard Shelby and Jeff Sessions, lampooned and caricatured in Underhill’s story as “Big squeaky and Lil’ squeaky,” adamantly opposed the so-called taxpayer “bailouts” of Detroit’s unionized auto industry by the Obama administration and a

democratic-led Congress in 2009. Both Shelby and Sessions repeatedly denounced the government's re-structuring of the industry as a political pay-out to the President's "big labor" allies and both made a point of denouncing the supposedly unwarranted and exorbitant salaries of GM and Chrysler's United Auto Workers employees, arguing that a wasteful and corrupt unionized auto sector should be allowed to go under while the non-union auto jobs imported from overseas to their home state of Alabama should presumably be permitted to flourish in the state's "business friendly" climate. That this was the precise political moment into which the Keller statue emerged is, of course, very telling and shows once again how state-sponsored visual cultural productions of Helen Keller such as the statue of her funded by Alabama's wealthy business leaders and philanthropists can work to narrate particular political, economic, and historical moments in ways that bolster the status quo. For Underhill, this is precisely what allows Keller's image to function, in his words, as "a doll summoned for purposes of distraction."<sup>82</sup>

The rendering of Keller as a "doll" and non-political agent is also quite telling and, once again as Underhill's story makes clear, it is intimately and inextricably linked to the production of neoliberal cultural narrations of the present economic and social order. Underhill skillfully draws upon actual Keller quotes from her numerous public speeches and autobiographies to make the connection between the apotheosis of Keller as disabled, child-woman saint and the deliberate erasure from public history of Keller the radical activist. He explained to me that he did most of his research on Keller at the Mobile Public Library where the facts of her radical life were available to anyone who bothered to investigate. Yet, dignitaries at the fictional unveiling ceremonies are scandalized when a young blind student from Alabama reads the Braille inscription at the statue's base that, thanks to Keller's adult

specter, now reads: H-E-L-E-N K-E-L-L-E-R S-O-C-I-A-L-I-S-T. Their dismay and horror are deepened as they learn that the statue's base, in a ticker-tape like scroll, is now issuing forth some of Keller's most infamous and radical sentiments. In addition, gift shop brochures have been changed to reflect Keller's radical politics and a TV monitor in the Capitol begins scrolling her 1909 speech in support of striking International Workers of the World (IWW) union members. Underhill quotes this speech at length in his text. Writing in italics to delineate that the words are actually Keller's own, Underhill has the spirit of Helen Keller inform stunned on-lookers that: "I am the determined foe of the capitalist system which denies workers the rights of human beings. I consider it fundamentally wrong, radically unjust, and cruel...the country is governed by the richest, for the corporations, bankers, and the land speculators... I love the red flag and what it symbolizes for me and other Socialists."<sup>83</sup>

Alabama's fictional Senators, the two "Squeakys," immediately demand a Congressional investigation and are stunned to discover that the real Helen Keller was a Socialist, women's rights, and anti-nuclear activist who, in real life as in Underhill's story, publically denounced the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki upon visiting those sites on a visit to Japan after World War II. They are just as disturbed to learn from the Congressional Research Service that Keller was a Swedenborgian whose Christianity was circumscribed by pagan rituals and a mystical belief in fairies and the supernatural. Meanwhile, Underhill's fiction relates, the City Council in Keller's hometown of Tuscumbia, Alabama passes an emergency resolution declaring that while "after she departed (from Tuscumbia) in her youth she may fallen under the influence of others who took advantage of her handicaps to lure her into parroting their opinions; the *real* Helen, however, would always be the decent, loyal,

patriotic, and Christian one formed in her childhood home.”<sup>84</sup> When the Big and Lil’ Squeakys attempt to read this resolution into the Congressional Record, the disabled but clarion voice of Helen Keller interrupts to declare precisely as she did in an actual essay published in opposition to U.S. involvement in World War I:

Some people are grieved because they imagine I am in the hands of unscrupulous persons who lead me astray and persuade me to espouse unpopular causes and make me the mouthpiece of their propaganda. Not let it be understood once and for all that I do not want their pity; I would not change places with them. I know what I am talking about. My sources of information are as good and reliable as anybody else’s. I am papers and magazines (in Braille) from England, France, Germany, that I can read myself. Few can do that among those who suppose my opinions are not my own. Though I cannot see the glitter of their finery, neither can they thread a needle in the dark.<sup>85</sup>

Again, Underhill juxtaposes the mythic Helen Keller in bronze against the historical Keller as activist in order to satirize the contemporary uses to which Keller’s popular image are put in the neoliberal moment. Underhill’s story emphasizes Keller’s investments in radical social change. While politicians in the present attempt to render Keller a depoliticized child holding mass appeal for public audiences through a work of visual culture, Underhill uses the medium of satirical fiction to remind his audience that the real Keller defied such caricature during her lifetime even as, as Kim Nielsen suggested earlier in this chapter, she sometimes used that persona to achieve her own ends. Underhill’s story ends sardonically with an overzealous pentagon general inadvertently initiating nuclear apocalypse after vaporizing the U.S. Capitol in, it turns out, a vain attempt to rid the complex of the “rogue Socialist Satan” now apparently in possession of it. Years later, pilgrims to the site uncover the Keller statue dubbing it “Our Lady of the Crater.” Reified again as “an ethereal voice carrying messages much disputed because they were deemed difficult to interpret and hard to heed,” the Keller

statue in Underhill's story persists in post-apocalypse as a meditation on the work done by public cultural productions.<sup>86</sup>

In Underhill's counter-narrative of the Keller statue, such cultural productions emerge to obscure past truths as a means of managing the social, political, and economic fractures and fissions of the present. In Underhill's fiction, this obfuscation happens firmly within the realm of visual and material culture. A description welcoming tourists to the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center I found in Underhill's file illustrates this point. It reads:

Your visit to the historic U.S. Capitol begins as you enter the Capitol Visitors Center. With its soaring spaces and skylight views of the Capitol Dome, the Visitor Center welcomes you on a journey of discovery. Through films, exhibits, and tours, you'll learn about how this magnificent building was built and how citizens can participate in this extraordinary experiment called representative democracy.<sup>87</sup>

Yet, like the Keller statue itself, such "films, exhibits, and tours" when viewed uncritically can work to limit the scope of our "discovery" by attempting to narrate our journey through history in ways that implicitly and explicitly bolster the present state of affairs while forging the terms of participation in this "experiment called representative democracy."

Interestingly, in Underhill's story of the Keller statue run amuck, a worker at the Congressional Research Service is able to confirm that the voice being heard in the halls of Congress is indeed Keller's through his discovery of a YouTube video featuring Keller's real voice. This aspect of Underhill's story was inspired by an actual video spliced from a 1930 newsreel that Underhill himself noted in the "clip file" he compiled on the Keller statue while writing his satire. The short clip depicts Helen at age 50 "learning to talk" with her teacher Annie Sullivan. The clip ends with Keller poignantly enunciating the words "I'm not dumb now."<sup>88</sup> This interlude into Underhill's research for his story is worth noting for what it



reveals about how competing narratives of Keller are forged and formed through different kinds of cultural productions and from the different perspectives of cultural producers.

Underhill never provides his readers with the details of the video that inspired him to enable his fictional researcher to confirm that the voice of Keller evinced in the story was indeed Keller's. Yet the files he compiled and was generous enough to share with me confirm that this newsreel footage, uploaded to YouTube in June of 2009, did indeed inspire the inclusion of Keller's spoken voice in his story. But while Underhill presents Keller's spoken voice as an extension of her activism, the video he drew inspiration from shows that activism as heart-wrenchingly circumscribed by social norms. The phrase "I'm not dumb now" conveys the sense that Keller is now, somehow, more human, less freakish. Thus, while Underhill's story works to establish Keller's humanity through her identification as an activist and writer, the YouTube video referenced and drawn upon but not detailed in the story, reveals how Keller's work was mediated in her time by discourses that defined her "humanity" by her ability to speak. Indeed, while Underhill as cultural producer and long-time political activist wishes to emphasize Keller's political agency, Keller's own declaration "I'm not dumb now," reveals the limits of that agency by showing that Keller's attempts to achieve a recognizable and respected sense of self during her adult life took place within a cultural and discursive matrix that worked to skew her sense of self as contingent upon her capacity for able-bodiedness.

In this chapter I have shown how public histories of Helen Keller deployed by her home state of Alabama consistently worked to deploy heteronormative expectations of gender and ability in this service of sustaining, and indeed, naturalizing, processes of social injustice. In the next chapter, I take up historical representations of FDR's polio in order to show how

efforts to challenge negative stereotypes and correct the historical record around disability also risks reify existing structures of inequality for disabled and nondisabled alike.

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## **Chapter 2: ‘An Argument in Bronze’:**

### **The FDR Memorial Controversy, Queer Disability Studies, and the Politics of Representing Disability in Contemporary Public History**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the controversy surrounding the 2001 addition of a statue depicting President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a wheelchair at the FDR Memorial in Washington, D.C. I consider the public debate over whether to show FDR in a wheelchair—in light of portrayals of his polio—offered by curators of the 2005 Smithsonian exhibition “Whatever happened to Polio.” Arguing against popular narratives of FDR’s polio as an embodied condition he heroically “overcame,” I contend that visual analysis informed by queer disability studies can make possible histories of Roosevelt’s polio for public consumption that are not premised on the president’s ability to conform to gendered and able-bodied notions of strength, proficiency, and ability. Furthermore, I argue that public histories of FDR’s paralysis that do not depend on bolstering his able-bodied status not only help to expose and challenge the supremacy of visual culture in defining and regulating disability, but also labor to produce new understandings of disability history that are not necessarily grounded in able-bodied perceptions and perspectives. Histories of FDR’s polio grounded in queer disability studies thus also work to confront the pervasive cultural fiction that disability most often is a visibly discernable, personal, and physiological “problem” best addressed through the correction, erasure, or assimilation of physical and cognitive difference to able-bodied norms and standards of social, aesthetic, and economic value.

I begin this chapter with a look at the successful efforts waged by disability rights advocates, scholars, and historians to amend the FDR Memorial in order to more accurately

reflect the severity of Roosevelt's post-polio paralysis. Led by the National Organization on Disability, "The FDR in a Wheelchair Campaign" effectively established a visual and material history of FDR's polio that defied Western hagiographies of prominent historical figures as always already able-bodied. This achievement spoke to the influence of the disability rights movement in helping to confront negative cultural stereotypes about, and correct the historical record around, disability. At the same time, however, both the FDR in a Wheelchair Campaign and the resulting wheelchair statue addition present FDR's disability to public audiences as a reflection his character, leadership, and private, celebratory struggle over polio. Framing FDR's disability as a crippling challenge he braved through individual will, the wheelchair campaign and statue addition eschew the social, political, and economic dimensions of Roosevelt's disability while leaving the visual field's privileged role in establishing the normative terms for including his disability in public history largely intact and unquestioned. In so doing, the wheelchair campaign and statue subtly but powerfully evaded histories of FDR's polio that might address the ways in which people with disabilities have struggled collectively to challenge their systematic marginalization and exclusion from American life, history, and culture.

Following my analysis of the FDR in a Wheelchair Campaign, I move to a consideration of the efforts of scholars and historians working in Disability studies to rhetorically frame the FDR Memorial's wheelchair statue addition with an engraving aimed at underscoring the social and political dimensions of Roosevelt's disability while challenging cultural perceptions of disability as an affliction to overcome. I argue that the work of these scholars demonstrates the value of queerness and disability studies to public histories of disability and illustrates the difficulties inherent in trying to present histories of

disability for public consumption that are not constrained by normative binaries such as “normal” and “abnormal” or “able-bodied” and “disabled.” To consider how public histories of FDR’s polio might begin to productively question such binaries while also challenging the authority of visual culture to accurately represent disability, I conclude this chapter with a brief look at presentations of FDR’s polio featured in the Smithsonian exhibition *Whatever Happened to Polio*.

Staged at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., the exhibition’s physical space and online counterpart were deliberately designed as departures from conventional histories of polio as an exclusively medical phenomenon. Rather than describing polio as a singularly devastating disease conquered by Western medicine, the exhibition attempts to capture the social experience and cultural impact of polio in the United States and elsewhere through visual images, personal narratives, and material objects. Portrayals of FDR in particular were created to counter dominant cultural narratives of Roosevelt’s polio as a personal struggle from which he triumphantly emerged. Trained as an historian of medicine, the exhibition’s principal curator, Katherine Ott, consciously incorporated both disability studies and visual culture studies theories and methodologies into the exhibition, encouraging audiences to question preconceived notions of the FDR story. Critical scholarly perspectives on visual culture proved especially useful in exposing as well as complicating the normalizing effects of photographic images on people with polio. The *Whatever Happened to Polio* exhibition thus succeeded in producing a public history of FDR’s polio that did not rely on conceits of courage and conquest over disability. Curators also confronted the specific role of visual culture in shaping histories of disability for public consumption; permitting audiences an opportunity to contemplate the various ways in which



the visual field has historically influenced and reflected the production of normative knowledge about disability.

### **‘It was a Visual Thing’: The Origins, Strategies, and Rhetoric of the ‘FDR in a Wheelchair’ Campaign**

In February 1997, about 150 demonstrators shouting “Don’t hide FDR’s source of strength” and displaying photographs of the president in his wheelchair gathered at the site of the FDR Memorial to demand that a statue of the president sitting in his wheelchair be included. Jim Dickson of the National Organization on Disability told the Washington Post “Hiding FDR’s disability is an affront to every American, with and without a disability. FDR led the nation through the Great Depression, to victory in World War II, and he did so from a wheelchair.” Evan J. Kemp, Jr. chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission under President George H. W. Bush, told reporters that if the FDR Memorial Commission failed to include a statue of Roosevelt in a wheelchair he and other activists “will be chaining ourselves to the White House gates.”<sup>1</sup>

In March of 1995, hoping to capitalize on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of FDR’s death, the National Organization on Disability began efforts to influence the design of the FDR Memorial. The organization had little success however, in lobbying the congressionally-chartered commissions responsible for approving the FDR Memorial’s design. Along with the memorial’s venerable architect Lawrence Halprin, the FDR Memorial Commission resisted calls to amend the memorial to portray more accurately the profundity of Roosevelt’s paralysis. On March 1, 1995, National Organization on Disability co-founder Michael Deland attended a meeting of the FDR Memorial Commission urging members to amend the memorial to include the depiction of President Roosevelt in a wheelchair. According to the

National Organization on Disability's 1998 annual report, Deland told the FDR Memorial Commission that depicting FDR in a wheelchair would let the world know that a person with a disability can become president of the United States and that failing to explicitly show FDR's disability would perpetuate antiquated stereotypes about the limitations of people with disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

A statement on the memorial commission's meeting with Deland in the papers of the United States Commission of Fine Arts describes the response of various memorial commission members beginning with the commission's powerful co-chair Democratic Senator Daniel Inouye. A distinguished World War II veteran who lost an arm in combat, Inouye eventually would introduce legislation to add to the memorial a wheelchair-using FDR statue. The memorial commission characterized Inouye's views on amending the memorial in March of 1995 thusly:

Senator Daniel K. Inouye, member of the Commission for over 20 years and current co-chair said there was never any attempt on the part of the Commission to conceal President Roosevelt's disability, but from the beginning, the Commission decided to honor the fact that FDR himself chose to guard his condition closely and not reveal the extent of his disability to the public. Senator Inouye said, 'I for one would not want to redo history. FDR was Commander-in-chief of the greatest fighting force in the world and he wanted to be viewed as a strong leader. I would hate to see the man exploited after he was dead.'<sup>3</sup>

Memorial commission member David B. Roosevelt added that while he was "not personally opposed to the depiction of my grandfather's disability," the purpose of the memorial "was not to provide social commentary."<sup>4</sup> The statement also characterizes a letter to the FDRMC from FDR's eldest grandson Curtis. Noting that while Curtis Roosevelt, "understands that some members of the handicapped community would like to emphasize the handicapped condition of FDR," the statement then quotes Curtis Roosevelt's assertion that "FDR would

have been quite disturbed. He was a very private person and went to great lengths to avoid any discussion or comment on any illness that might be plaguing him.”<sup>5</sup>

On March 28, 1995, Dorann Gunderson, executive director of the FDR Memorial Commission faxed the commission’s statement on the March 1 meeting to Charles Atherton, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts secretary, along with an attached memo explaining that Michael Deland “wants to see FDR in a wheelchair” and that the commission had unanimously rejected “any proposed changes.”<sup>6</sup> In her memo to Atherton, Gunderson noted “The handicapped issue will probably continue as long as these individuals get publicity.”<sup>7</sup> As Gunderson’s memo makes clear, the FDR Memorial Commission had little interest in considering Deland’s proposed changes. The statement that Gunderson faxed to Atherton indicates that members believed an inscription in the memorial’s time-line (inscribed on *steps* in the back of the memorial) “**1921, STRICKEN WITH POLIOMYELITIS-HE NEVER AGAIN WALKED UNAIDED**” was sufficient for “acknowledging and honoring President Roosevelt’s condition.”<sup>8</sup>

The memorial commission’s contention that FDR’s disability was “a condition” that was “strictly a private matter” combines with its assertion that an explicit depiction of FDR’s wheelchair would undermine the president’s image as a “strong leader” to locate Roosevelt’s disability firmly within what disability studies scholars have described as the “medical model” of disability. Historians Teresa Meade and David Serlin explain the medical model thusly: “Traditionally, disability has been understood epistemologically as a physiological or psychological condition defined within a medical model that codes the “normal” body according to a fixed and narrow standard of economic and social productivity.” Meade and Serlin go on to explain that “In the Medical model of disability, disabled people are seen as

social embodiments of their disability: they are dysfunctional, quasi-functional, or non-functional bodies to be repaired, or, if not, then managed with bureaucratic or economic efficiency.”<sup>9</sup> In this schema, the visualization of FDR’s disability in a historical monument to his presidency risks turning Roosevelt into the social embodiment of his disability, that is a “dysfunctional, quasi-functional, or non-functional” body fundamentally irreconcilable with the vision of a strong, wartime, Depression-era leader proffered by the memorial commission.

At the same time, however, the memorial commission’s assertion that the memorial “must not provide social commentary” or promote an exploitative “redo” of history conveys a recognition that visual and material representations are key sites for the production and regulation of cultural and historical knowledge, including knowledge about disability and those with disabilities. The problem is not really that the memorial might “provide social commentary” but rather that it might provide the “wrong” kind of social commentary—that it may, in fact, “redo” established public histories of FDR that worked to systematically erase his disability. The memorial commission’s statement thus suggest that presenting FDR in his wheelchair would both misrepresent a “strong leader” and constitute a political act of rendering visible that which “history” and FDR himself supposedly chose to make invisible.

The visible presence of FDR’s wheelchair at the memorial, moreover, evidences what queer disability studies scholar Margrit Shildrick terms an “anomalous morphology.” Shildrick argues that “anomalous morphologies” have long been regarded as fundamental threats to the cultural authority of able bodiedness. Such threats, Shildrick contends, must be met through the erasure and debasement of physical difference. As Shildrick explains:

Where physical and mental autonomy, the ability to think rationally and impartially, and interpersonal separation and distinction are the valued attributes of western subjectivity, than any compromise of control over one's body, any indication of interdependency and connectivity, or of corporeal instability, are the occasion—for the normative majority—of deep-seated anxiety that devalues difference.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, Shildrick contends, angst about bodily variation is most acute in relation to disability, gender, and sexuality. For Shildrick, “disability quite fundamentally performs a queering of normative paradigms.”<sup>11</sup> Shildrick's focus on the relationship between gender, sexuality, and disability points to the ways in which various kinds of normative knowledge about the body (gender, sex, ability) work in tandem to regulate the production of cultural knowledge about disability and people with disabilities. It is not just that FDR's wheelchair risks making him appear weak, it is that the visualization of disability at the memorial looms to disrupt notions of his gendered able-bodiedness and autonomous subjectivity central to dominant understandings of him as a “strong” national leader.

As photographer and visual culture theorist Jessica Evans has shown, visual renditions of people with disabilities in cultural productions have long taken shape within a heteropatriarchal cultural matrix that works to define, explain, contain, and police physical difference, in part, through a perpetual iteration of idealized and highly gendered bodies. Visual culture, Evans suggests, most often and most readily defines optimal “healthy” bodies over and against the feminized, damaged, and dependent body of the disabled. Writing about FDR's particular predicament in the age of visual reproduction, Evans notes:

Status and authority in images are implicitly associated with an absence of disability. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt was never seen in his wheelchair although his legs were paralyzed. Being President of the USA was felt to be incompatible with being physically damaged—the wheelchair is the ultimate symbol of lack of power.<sup>12</sup>

While Shildrick points toward the transgressive potential of visualizing disability, theorists of visual culture such as Evans foreground the ways in which visual renditions of physical difference are anchored by rhetorical formations, discursive systems, cultural and social norms, and political and power dynamics that work to establish, in French philosopher Michel Foucault's words "regimes of truth."<sup>13</sup> Recognizing the entrenched character of cultural discourses of disability and, implicitly, the influence of these discourses on the visual reception of "morphological difference," Shildrick contends that deconstructing and challenging the denial and degradation of bodily difference means doing more than simply abrogating its erasure from the visual frame. Rather, Shildrick argues, the normative cultural and "psycho-social imaginary" that undergirds the management and obliteration of difference also must be confronted. Arguing against social models of disability "inclusion," Shildrick explains, "The issue then, is not to go on extending the formal framework in which people who experience disabilities can maximize their own potentials, but to seek ways of first understanding and then transforming the nature of that psycho-social cultural imaginary."<sup>14</sup>

The public debate over amending the FDR Memorial brings into focus the insights of Shildrick and Evans, revealing how the visualization of disabilities such as FDR's can become the occasion for further instantiating, rather than dislodging, normative paradigms of embodiment. For instance, by placing an emphasis on FDR's "ability," proponents of portraying Roosevelt's wheelchair use successfully framed his apparent "morphological difference" in normative and nonthreatening terms that addressed the memorial commission's concerns that depicting his disability might undermine his authority in history and destabilize the authority of history itself as an able-bodied, heteronormative domain. As Alan Reich of the National Organization on Disability stressed in a 1998 memorandum,

FDR's polio should be understood as emblematic of his "unmatched ability."<sup>15</sup> Arguing that Roosevelt's disability was an essential aspect of his political acumen, Reich added "FDR's experience with disability was central to his character and his persona. It was the crucible in which his leadership qualities of courage, compassion, and determination were forged."<sup>16</sup>

The activists outside the White House gates insisting that FDR's disability must not be hidden thus shared the FDR memorial commission's presumption of a link between visual and material representations of FDR's disability at the memorial and the production of cultural and historical knowledge about Roosevelt and his presidency. But while commission members viewed the presence of a wheelchair at the memorial as threatening to established histories of Roosevelt as "strong leader," disability activists understood the FDR Memorial as an opportunity to challenge cultural stereotypes of disability as something to be feared, hidden, and corrected by showing how Roosevelt's "anomalous morphology" strengthened his leadership and did not prevent him from fully assimilating to American life. Historian of the disability rights movement Paul K. Longmore has argued that FDR himself was the first to understand that the visible presence of his polio might well undermine his authority. According to Longmore, Roosevelt struck a pivotal "bargain" with the American public over his disability in order to contain threats to his authority posed by the presence of his impaired body. The bargain involved more than a strategic elision of the president's wheelchair use. Longmore explains that the bargain involved defining the terms of social and political inclusion in American life of people with disabilities. Longmore described the bargain thusly: "The non-handicapped majority says, in effect, 'we will extend to you provisional and partial tolerance of your public presence—as long as you display a continuous cheerful striving towards normalization.'"<sup>17</sup> Reflecting on Longmore's formulation of Roosevelt's

“bargain,” disability studies scholar Mary Johnson notes that “‘cheerful’ is the key word,” because, says Johnson, “Disabled people can’t complain, can’t whimper—and certainly can’t protest. That’s not part of The Bargain.”<sup>18</sup> She joins Longmore in concluding that Roosevelt not only sold this image of disability to the American public, but succeeded in making it the “preferred, even the required,” conception of disability in the United States<sup>19</sup>

Longmore’s description of FDR’s bargain explicitly suggests an investment in normalizing disabled people and containing them within the normative terms of the U.S. nation-state. After all, the bargain demands that “disabled” people not actively probe a social, cultural, political, and economic system that devalues morphological difference in favor of properly able-bodied persons whose social and economic value is not questioned by liberal orthodoxies of autonomous individualism. As Carol A. Breckinridge and Candace Vogler have suggested, able-bodiedness has long been seen as an indispensable prerequisite to the cherished notions of individuality, social worth, and pecuniary value that underwrite liberal capitalist democracies. Writing on the “limits of embodiment,” Breckenridge and Vogler explain:

The ‘person’ at the center of traditional liberal theory is not simply an individual locus of subjectivity (however psychologically fragmented, incoherent, or troubled). He is an *able-bodied* locus of subjectivity, one whose unskilled labor may be substituted freely for the labor of other such individuals, who can imagine himself largely self-sufficient because almost everything conspires to help him take his enabling body for granted.<sup>20</sup>

Taken together, the analysis of Shildrick, Evans, Longmore, Breckinridge, and Vogler helps to explain the FDR memorial commission’s resistance to the addition of a wheelchair statue. Memorial commission members and others opposed to amending the memorial to include depiction of Roosevelt’s wheelchair use insisted that a wheelchair-using Roosevelt would be



historically inaccurate because it violated the concealment of FDR's disability in his own time. As Longmore's analysis suggest, such appeals to "historical accuracy" also pointed to an investment in regulating the visual field of public history to exclude those morphological differences which might call into question the cultural and historical authority of able-bodiedness.

Indeed, those opposed to augmenting the memorial argued time and again that presenting FDR in his wheelchair was not only historically inaccurate, but was a betrayal of the president's wishes that threatened to mar the nation's collective memory of a time before disability and its "social commentary" allegedly arrived to stain our cinematic recollection of a pristine president who was honorable enough not to parade his paraplegia before the public. Conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer, himself a paraplegic wheelchair user following a diving accident as a young man, insisted in several columns on the subject that FDR be given what Krauthammer called "the dignity of denial."<sup>21</sup> Singling out the National Organization on Disability, columnist Mark Fisher ridiculed the FDR in a Wheelchair Campaign as an effort to "force history to conform to our values."<sup>22</sup> Fisher added that the campaign undermined "Lawrence Halprin's brilliant design" by "contradicting what the original memorial had been so successful at communicating: a sense of what America was then, during the Depression and World War II."<sup>23</sup> Columnist Mona Charen issued the same critique. After asserting "Once you head down the path of adjusting history to fit modern sensibilities, you are engaged in Soviet-style history," Charen bitterly and presumptuously intoned "Yes FDR was disabled. He hated being disabled. Who wouldn't?"<sup>24</sup> Such diatribes again demonstrate the will to renounce disability from history and discreetly assert able-bodiedness as the only legitimate form of historical embodiment fit for public consumption.

That such chagrined proclamations consistently denounced efforts to visualize Roosevelt's disability in history as an exercise in "political correctness" inappropriate to the presumed "timelessness" of public memorials also helps to elucidate why, in working to fashion a history of FDR's disability that was both historically grounded and politically pragmatic, the National Organization on Disability sought to avoid the more radical implications of representing Roosevelt's wheelchair use by framing the his disability as an apolitical heroic struggle with lessons for all. As recently as 2010, American Studies Scholar Erica Doss singled-out the wheelchair campaign and the resulting statue as a "prime example" of what she identified as "today's memorial mania." Doss, noting that "Roosevelt himself worked to downplay and disguise his impairment" contended that the FDR in a Wheelchair Campaign exemplified "the sense of entitlement, or, 'ownership' that pervades today's public sphere: increasingly, self-interest groups view the nation's memorials as the direct extension of their particular causes."<sup>25</sup> Countering such claims, esteemed FDR biographers Doris Kearns Goodwin and Hugh Gregory Gallagher joined National Organization on Disability President Alan A. Reich in asserting that FDR's paralysis was the source of his exceptional ability.<sup>26</sup> In press interviews and in National Organization on Disability campaign literature, Gallagher posed the wheelchair debate as one about image and iconography. Casting the memorial as a social space for meaning-making, Gallagher argued "It is important for Americans with disabilities—and as a symbol of how American society perceives its disabled people—that the memorial depict the man as he was: tall, strong, heroic, and disabled...Don't let them steal our hero!"<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, Alan Reich sought to assure critics that efforts to display FDR's disability were not part of some precipitous political agenda but were instead a move that would affirm basic American

economic and social values. Reich stated that “During this public debate, we in the disability community have sometimes been identified as a special interest group...Our view is that FDR’s successful struggle makes him not just our hero, but a hero for all mankind.” Noting that everyone faces handicaps and challenges in life, Reich continued:

The disability community does have a special agenda that goes beyond inspiration. It is to ensure that the ability and strength in everybody is recognized, so that all can participate fully in life. It is to make sure that disabled applicants in jobs do not get pushed aside. It is to encourage our sons and daughters to make friends with kids in their class have disabilities rather than make fun of them on the playground. It is to say proudly there is no longer any shame in having a disability.<sup>28</sup>

The rhetoric Gallagher, Reich, and others again reveals how the visual and discursive realms work to together to render Roosevelt’s paralysis as a condition consistent with “tall, strong, heroic” normative able-bodiedness and social and economic assimilation.

The public debate over whether to explicitly depict FDR’s disability at the memorial also underscored how visual arguments emerged as decisive in the contest over modifying the memorial and further illustrates how and why the campaign for a visible rendering of FDR’s paralysis became tethered to dominant discourses of able-bodiedness even as the campaign’s rhetoric successfully challenged the erasure of Roosevelt’s disability from history. Indeed the FDR in a Wheelchair campaign arguably succeeded precisely because it persuasively linked FDR’s wheelchair use and paralysis with his courage, leadership, and perseverance in ways that worked to resolve the profound ambivalence about disability that many critics of amending the memorial consistently expressed.

Neal Estern’s grandiose statue of a seated Roosevelt in his naval cape with dog Fala is perhaps the starkest illustration of ambivalence towards disability at the memorial. Those resistant to amending the memorial argued that Estern’s statue not only featured caster

wheels characteristic of those found on chairs used by Roosevelt at his Hyde Park estate, but that Estern had carefully sculpted Roosevelt's leg to showcase the braces known to have protruded from the President's pants. Blind since adolescence, Jim Dickson of the National Organization on Disability joined others in pointing out that it takes a very discerning eye to recognize such subtle allusions to FDR's paralysis. The tiny wheels on Estern's statue, for instance, are only visible to those able and willing to step up to the statue and look behind it. Dickson related a revealing story about activists' attempts to influence Estern's design. "They kept telling us that Estern was doing a statue that would show FDR's disability and we kept saying, 'let us see it,' but they never did."<sup>29</sup> After one meeting with Lawrence Halprin's assistants and National Park Service officials, Dickson recalled a frustrated supporter of amending the memorial who had insider knowledge of the statue's development tipping him off anonymously by phone that Estern's statue would soon be unveiled at a foundry in Dutchess County, New York.<sup>30</sup> Dickson quickly organized a protest. A National Organization on Disability memorandum dated April 17, 1997 confirmed that "under the direction of Jim Dickson" there was a "demonstration on Tuesday in Beacon, New York, outside the foundry where two of the sculptures are being cast."<sup>31</sup>

For the National Organization on Disability and its supporters, the contest over Estern's statue once again demonstrated a reluctance to depict FDR's disability in a forthright way, suggesting deeply held negative cultural attitudes about disability. In April 1995, United States Commission of Fine Arts Secretary Charles Atherton visited Neil Estern's Brooklyn, New York studio where he examined a maquette (clay model) of Estern's statue. Atherton described his impressions of Estern's work to the *Washington Post*. He characterized Estern's proposed sculptural rendering of FDR as "extremely somber." After

telling the *Post's* Benjamin Forgey that Roosevelt's feet and legs "do not look natural," Atherton continued: "The legs are troubled. You can see the very thin bone structure underneath the trousers. The eyes are haunting. There's a sense of gauntness, a sense of pain, to the whole piece."<sup>32</sup>

This was apparently what officials had meant when they assured activists that Estern was making a statue that would accurately represent FDR's polio. Writer Benjamin Forgey followed Atherton's ghoulish visual analysis of Estern's maquette by observing to readers, "Though the seat is not a wheelchair, this portrait could be just the image advocates for the disabled are looking for."<sup>33</sup> But, as one *Washington Post* reader in Maryland incisively reasoned in a letter to the editor responding to Forgey's piece, "Opponents to suggestions that Franklin D. Roosevelt be depicted in his memorial as having a disability completely miss the point as to why he SHOULD be shown as he was." Identifying as disabled, the reader elaborated:

Post writer Benjamin Forgey and Commission of Fine Arts Secretary Charles Atherton assume that people with disabilities want FDR depicted as gaunt, haunting, and in pain. Why? We certainly don't perceive ourselves that way, and I seriously doubt FDR thought of himself as a pitiful victim. Roosevelt hid his impairment because of public perceptions about disability that still exists 60 years later. That is why showing FDR as he really was, and celebrating his accomplishments, could educate people that having a disability and being a great person are not mutually exclusive.<sup>34</sup>

The idea that, as this *Post* reader suggested, memorials should serve the social and cultural function of not only educating us about the past, but also of inspiring and provoking those living in the present, was a point stressed continually by the myriad supporters of the wheelchair campaign. As wheelchair campaign supporter and FDR granddaughter Anne Roosevelt repeatedly stressed to the press, memorials are for the living, not for the dead.

“When you build a memorial, you build it not because the person wanted it, but for the future.”<sup>35</sup> Historian Scott Sandage likewise wrote in a 1996 *Washington Post* editorial that—to be effective—the FDR memorial “must remember this inspiring man in a way that extends his leadership into the present and the future without being constrained (as he sometimes was) by the shames and prejudices of the past.”<sup>36</sup>

Conversely, however, opponents of the wheelchair statue continued to link aesthetic and visual arguments to claims of historical accuracy via normative embodiment. In an April 2, 1997 interview with John Hockenberry of MSNBC’s *InterNight*, Commission of Fine Arts Chair J. Carter Brown argued that FDR did not want to be remembered as a wheelchair user and suggested that depicting him as such would be both out of step with FDR’s time, and would undermine the aesthetic quality of the memorial. “Do we care about history?” Brown asked. “Do we care whether we are being authentic and whether we are being of the time?” “This is now-ism,” Brown asserted. “This is the great chic to say we always have to revise history every few years to do it our way. Would we do a memorial of Washington and show him without his teeth? I mean he didn’t have them.”<sup>37</sup> In a May 2, 1997 interview with Steve Posner of KCEO radio in San Diego, Brown spoke at length on the question of whether to present FDR in his wheelchair. “It was a visual thing,” Brown told Posner. “He (Roosevelt) was very careful not to have that be the visual image of the way he was perceived.”<sup>38</sup> When asked to comment specifically on the wheelchair campaign, Brown made clear he recognized the wheelchair campaign’s political dimensions. Accusing disability activists of what he called “a kind of emotional blackmail that gives a terrific leverage,” Brown explained, “I’ve been around Washington long enough that I know a good lobby when I see one.”<sup>39</sup> Implying that a wheelchair would be aesthetically inappropriate, Brown again employed the anecdote

about George Washington's wooden-teeth in order to argue for the importance of aesthetics.<sup>40</sup>

Architect Lawrence Halprin presented his opposition to a wheelchair statue in similar terms. Though Halprin would eventually call the wheelchair statue an “enhancement” to the memorial—he always maintained in the press and in public statements that his original 1997 version of the memorial was the most “historically accurate” and artistically valid.<sup>41</sup> Hence, in a 2001 letter to the journal *Landscape Architecture*, Halprin critiqued the successful effort to revise the memorial with a wheelchair sculpture by at once appealing to artistic and aesthetic credibility and insinuating that depicting FDR's wheelchair use will—with heavy-handed sanctimony—alienate viewers from history. Wrote Halprin:

In the FDR Memorial, the great artists who worked with me made visible the life of our generation. They did not do it in a lecturing manner but so that people visiting the memorial could participate in history. We did not want messages to be hammering at visitors. In a profound way, that is what this new addition violates. It forced us to focus on a very specific element, FDR's disability and his use of a wheelchair.<sup>42</sup>

Halprin's analysis ignored the fact the wheelchair addition not only permits disabled visitor's to participate in history, it also places disabled people (and their experiences and perspectives) within history. As feminist and visual culture theorist Irit Rogoff observed in 2002 “In a critical culture in which we have been trying to wrest representation away from the dominance of patriarchal, Eurocentric and heterosexist normativization, visual culture provides immense opportunities for rewriting culture through our concerns and our journeys.”<sup>43</sup> While the evidence and analysis in the chapter clearly demonstrates how difficult and fraught “rewriting” normative culture through the visual field can be, Rogoff's declaration nonetheless suggest once again that the appeals to “historical accuracy” made by Brown, Lawrence Halprin, and many others were also appeals to shore up ideals of able-

bodied normativity perceived as under political threat by the visible presence of disability, bodily difference, and the “concerns” and “journeys” of people with disabilities in history. That the National Organization on Disability and its supporters succeeded in placing FDR’s disability in history marks an important milestone in American public history. The hagiography of idealized—and always able-bodied—historical figures has been, if not ended, at least challenged and expanded by the FDR wheelchair statue. Historian of public monuments Kirk Savage argued accordingly in a 1998 letter to the National Park Service that the addition of a sculpture of FDR in his wheelchair would do much more than “inspire children with disabilities—who have no such images in public space.”<sup>44</sup> The addition, Savage insisted, would broaden understanding about disability and history and thus extend the power of the entire memorial well into the future. A wheelchair statue, Savage explained, “would help teach everyone what it means to be human, to overcome adversity and make a positive contribution in a world full of obstacles and challenges.”<sup>45</sup> Noting that the question was not whether, but how, to present FDR in his wheelchair, Savage elaborated:

Such an addition would indeed transform the whole memorial, but in a manner at once powerful and harmonious, daring and sympathetic. This is the opportunity we now have and should embrace to the fullest. For the image of FDR in a wheelchair to be effective, it must be accessible in the fullest sense of the word—so that someone in a wheelchair can join it, touch it, be photographed next to it. My own preference, is for a statue approaching life size... The more human the scale the better; the more we can approach it and identify with it.”<sup>46</sup>

Savage offered his letter as testimony to the FDR Memorial Statue Advisory Committee created by the Interior Department in September of 1997 some four months after the U.S. Congress mandated the wheelchair statue addition. The committee held a public hearing on March 25 of 1998 to solicit suggestions on how best to move forward with the wheelchair sculpture.



According to advisory committee member John Parsons, Savage's suggestions were entirely consistent with proposals made by the National Organization on disability when its members and supporters began working with Halprin, acclaimed sculpture Robert Graham, and the statue advisory committee on the wheelchair statue. Michael Deland and activist and scholar Hugh Gallagher served with Parsons as members of the committee. Like the historian Kirk Savage, the National Organization on Disability and its supporters insisted that the new statue should not conform in scale to the other statues at the memorial. Instead, the wheelchair statue should be at human scale, highly approachable, and exist within the viewer's own space. Such a statue, activists argued, would encourage audience interaction that was both visual and tactile.<sup>47</sup> The National Organization on Disability's success in accomplishing these aesthetic mandates signaled a critical shift in notions of accessibility—from purely practical concerns of access and experience stressed by disability activists prior the 1990 passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act—to post-ADA modes of *artistic* accessibility that challenged traditional conceptions of monumental form that have long eschewed the particular aesthetic experiences of persons with disabilities.

Yet, as I have attempted to suggest throughout this chapter, such an expansion of aesthetics to include disability and the perspectives of those with disabilities does not mitigate the need to challenge the normative terms upon which disability is often visualized in history and popular culture. Reflecting on the “wheelchair's rhetoric,” for instance, disability studies scholar and performer Petra Kuppers observes that wheelchairs function both as material objects that support and enable their users and as “rhetorical devices carrying narratives and making identities.”<sup>48</sup> Quoting historians of disability Paul Longmore and Lauri Umanski, Kuppers' analysis suggests the Memorial Commission's implication that

“strong” leaders do not use (or at least cannot be seen using) wheelchairs, employs the wheelchair as a signifier for those things “which Americans fear most: loss of independence, of autonomy, of control; in other words, a subjection to fate.”<sup>49</sup> Koppers argues, however, that, for many wheelchair users, the chair often becomes emblematic of just the opposite: power, autonomy, control, and even a kind of pleasure-in-difference that animates the formation of a range of affirmative social identities.<sup>50</sup> “And he did it all from his wheelchair” became a central mantra in wheelchair campaign’s literature and public rhetoric precisely because it anticipates an able-bodied public’s sense of awe and curiosity at learning that FDR led from a wheelchair while also affirming that chair as the seat of his leadership in ways that attempted to subvert and re-script the negative cultural connotations of the wheelchair.

But, such savvy efforts to challenge damaging conceptions of disability depend upon re-signifying the wheelchair from a marker of difference (perceived as negative and threatening) into a marker of ability and strength (qualities implicitly seen as positive, “normal,” and desirable). Positioning wheelchair users like Roosevelt as strong and “normal” thus alienates and degrades those with disabilities who are unwilling or unable to achieve able-bodied standards of ability, strength, and power. Referencing the work of radical lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich, queerness and disability theorist Robert McRuer suggest that these kinds of ostensibly positive narratives of disability and the wheelchair actually manifest what he terms “compulsory able-bodiedness.” Such narratives, McRuer contends, not only underscore the ways in which compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality work together (and indeed are mutually constituted) but also how threats to able-bodied/heterosexual hegemony must be met by aligning disabled bodies with heterosexual

and able-bodied values and norms.<sup>51</sup> Thus, FDR's wheelchair must not be seen as an artifact of emasculating "feminine" dependence. Rather, it must be recognized as the emblem of his "unmatched ability" and masculine power.

Importantly, efforts to re-signify Roosevelt's wheelchair took shape within the context of neoliberalism. A mode of political economy ascendant throughout the 1980s, 90s, and early 2000s, neoliberalism can be understood by culture studies scholars as both an economic project and a cultural and political project. Historian and queer studies scholar Lisa Duggan argues that neoliberalism's central aim of redistributing the world's wealth, power, and resources upwards entails an outright dismantling of FDR's New Deal consensus. Moreover, according to Duggan, destroying the social obligations of government, as well as the social safety net made possible by the New Deal, involved a sustained attack on downwardly redistributive social movements including those for civil rights and Black Power as well as feminism and lesbian and gay liberation.<sup>52</sup> In the United States, these attacks on movements for social and economic justice found expression in "culture wars" assaults on public institutions and spaces for democratic public life. Such "culture war" struggles, according to Duggan, made way for a neoliberal "multicultural" politics of symbolic inclusion of "others" designed for global consumption and compatible with the neoliberal project of upward wealth re-distribution. As a space for democratic public life, the FDR Memorial and the controversy surrounding it took shape in precisely this historical and social context. Only a few months prior Mike Deland's March 1995 meeting the FDR Memorial Commission, curators at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum had been forced to abandon a planned exhibition designed to explore the impact and historical significance of America's decision to use nuclear weapons against Japan at the end of the Second World

War. Military and veterans groups as well as members of congress, the press, and the public fiercely objected to the planned exhibition. Arguing that the graphic depiction of the ground-level effects of nuclear weaponry on Japanese cities and civilians constituted “anti-American” history and “politically correct” curating, critics of the exhibit also claimed that the planned display of the B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* which had dropped the bombs was an attempt to force “the countercultural values of the Vietnam era” on America’s last good war since the exhibition’s script dared to frame the plane as a weapon of war and not merely a harbinger of peace.<sup>53</sup>

Only a few years earlier, curators at the National Museum of American Art came under similar attack for an exhibition entitled “The West as America” which ventured to place the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century artists such as Frederick Remington and Charles Russell within the context of America’s westward expansion. Captions explicitly noted the violent and deadly genocidal conflicts between displaced Native Americans and white settlers as well as struggles between industrialists and workers migrating westward in search of work. Critiquing this and other exhibitions, culture warrior and former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities Lynn Cheney derisively noted that America’s monuments and museums “used to be places that invited visitors to learn about great works of art, their society, and the course of history.” “Today,” Cheney asserted in 1995, “they are apt instead to be in the business of debunking greatness, Western society, and even history itself.”<sup>54</sup> In addition to criticizing “politically correct” history, Cheney attacked affirmative action, feminism, Women’s Studies, gender-neutral language, critical race theory and multicultural curriculum as well as what she termed a “postmodernism” and “relativism” that had caused America and its culture to “stop making sense.”<sup>55</sup>

The polemics of Cheney and other prominent conservatives were central to debates over funding for the arts and public history throughout the 1990s. As Lisa Duggan's work suggests, these debates, and the attacks on the academy and public art and history they engendered, were concomitant to neoliberal privatization and a shrinking of the public sphere.<sup>56</sup> Arguing for the need to revitalize public life and political agency in the United States in the wake of neoliberalism and the "culture wars," queer studies scholar Lauren Berlant specifically identifies Washington, D.C.'s monuments and memorials as sites from which to understand the production of normalizing knowledge and normative citizen-subjects. Berlant argues that Washington, D.C. is a city designed to "manage" the meanings of American citizenship through a disorienting cyclorama of monuments, memorials, mythic national narratives, historical elisions, and symbolic inclusions designed to hide the contradictions between the principles of liberal democracy and the exclusionary practices of a society, culture, and economy that privileges and sustains white, male, heterosexual norms and standards. Monuments and memorials to U.S. presidents have achieved this, in part, by sculpturally iterating an image of what Berlant calls a "national iconic body" that forges the sexed, raced, and classed norms of social membership in U.S. national life.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, Berlant contends, the orthodox historical narratives and archetypal bodies evinced by D.C.'s national monuments and memorials offer pedagogical lessons in "how the system works." Such lessons help to produce what Berlant terms an "infantile citizenship" that works to sustain normative heteropatriarchal privilege and authority through the creation of a de-politicized and de-mobilized "intimate public sphere" where matters specifically concerning sex, race, class, ability, and exclusion and inclusion in American life are rendered as

“private” and unconnected to larger public dynamics of political economy, social inequality, and cultural contest.<sup>58</sup>

According to Berlant, it is not just that national memorials forge an image of national normative embodiment typically raced white and gender male, it is that such “American” embodiments are rhetorically and figuratively imagined as free from contradiction, discord, division, and inequality. Berlant notes for example how, in the “intimate public sphere,” citizenship is defined by personal acts and values so that public identities such as disabled, queer, or black, are cast as threats to an “American way of life” figured as private and, but for meddling activists, free from division.<sup>59</sup> For disability studies scholars, Berlant’s work in Queer studies also implicitly suggests how disabled bodies are necessarily inconsistent with the “iconic national body.” Writing on the “American Dream” as a cultural formation for instance, Berlant observes: “It is a story that addresses the fear of being stuck or reduced to a type, [*i.e. a disabled person or polio victim, (my addition)*] a redemptive story pinning its hopes on class mobility. Yet this promise is voiced in the language of unconflicted personhood: to be American in this view, would be to inhabit a secure space liberated from identities and structures that seem to constrain what a person can do in history.”<sup>60</sup>

Berlant’s analysis recalls the concerns of those opposed to placing FDR’s disability in history. Fears that presenting the president in a wheelchair would undermine his image as a leader and mean “revising” history in ways that might call into question able-bodied assumptions and privilege not only came to dominate the public discourse in opposition to displaying FDR in his wheelchair, but would also, as we have seen, help to forge the rhetorical ground on which advocates for the addition of a wheelchair sculpture would stake their own claims to both historical legitimacy and to the need for the memorial to visually

render FDR's disability as denoting power, strength, and (in the words Alan Reich) "unmatched ability."<sup>61</sup> The FDR wheelchair statue can thus be understood, in part, as an "iconic national body" compelled to meet certain norms of ability. That a statue of a visibly disabled (but not really disabled) FDR was being forged in the neoliberal "cultural wars" moment of the late 1990s and early 2000s has particular significance for those seeking social and economic justice for people with disabilities. Just as FDR's New Deal consensus was being dismantled, a wheelchair-using Roosevelt emerged on the political and cultural scene to serve as "proof" that those with disabilities can succeed in America. Yet, according to queerness and disability studies scholars Robert McRuer and Abbey L. Wilkerson, people with disabilities are among those most negatively impacted by neoliberalism's re-structuring of the New Deal social safety net. As Wilkerson and McRuer explained in 2003 "this moment in history of multinational, corporate capitalism is a bad one for most people with disabilities. Neoliberalism takes some principles as basic truths: that privatization is always a good thing: privatization can help countries cope with economic and social crisis." On the contrary however, "the privatization of health care, water, and electricity has had disproportionately negative effects on people with disabilities, people with HIV, women, people of color, the elderly, and poor people."<sup>62</sup> Working from within as well as across the fields of history, queer studies, and disability studies, scholars such as Duggan, Berlant, McRuer, and Wilkerson thus help us to understand the FDR Memorial controversy reflected larger cultural and political struggles over the distribution of wealth, disability rights, and who and what would continue to count as worthy of inclusion in public histories meant to represent the nation and its values.

Architect Lawrence Halprin accordingly presented his opposition to the wheelchair statue as having nothing to do with cultural values, power and inequality, or processes of social inclusion and exclusion. Though Halprin would eventually call the amendment to the memorial an “enhancement”—he always maintained in the press and in public statements that his original version of the memorial was the most “historically accurate” and artistically valid.<sup>63</sup> Halprin repeatedly contrasted his allegedly apolitical concerns for aesthetics and historical veracity with the supposedly hyper-political interests of the National Organization on Disability and its supporters. Hence, in a 2001 letter to the journal *Landscape Architecture*, Halprin critiqued the successful effort to revise the memorial with a wheelchair sculpture by at once appealing to artistic and aesthetic credibility and insinuating that depicting FDR’s wheelchair use will—with heavy-handed sanctimony—alienate viewers from history by placing politics above aesthetic truth. Wrote Halprin:

In the FDR Memorial, the great artists who worked with me made visible the life of our generation. They did not do it in a lecturing manner but so that people visiting the memorial could participate in history. We did not want messages to be hammering at visitors. In a profound way, that is what this new addition violates. It forced us to focus on a very specific element, FDR’s disability and his use of a wheelchair.<sup>64</sup>

Halprin’s analysis ignored the fact the wheelchair addition not only permits disabled visitors to participate in history, it also places them within history. This of course, is precisely what Halprin, Brown, and other opponents to amending the memorial seemed to fear most.

As feminist and visual culture theorist Irit Rogoff observed in 2002 “In a critical culture in which we have been trying to wrest representation away from the dominance of patriarchal, Eurocentric and heterosexist normativization, visual culture provides immense opportunities for rewriting culture through our concerns and our journeys.”<sup>65</sup> While the evidence and analysis in the chapter clearly demonstrates how difficult and fraught



“rewriting” normative culture through the visual field can be, Rogoff’s declaration nonetheless suggest once again that the appeals to “historical accuracy” made by Brown, Halprin, and many others were also appeals to shore up ideals of able-bodied normativity perceived as under political threat by the visible presence of disability, bodily difference, and morphological imperfection in history. That the National Organization on Disability and its supporters succeeded in placing FDR’s disability in history marks an important milestone in American public history were the hagiography of idealized historical embodiments has been, if not disrupted, and least expanded. Yet, as the next section attempts to illustrate, such an expansion does not mitigate the need for disability activists and scholars to challenge the normative terms upon which disability is visualized in history. On the contrary, symbolic inclusion of disability in history devoid of social and historical context can all too easily perpetuate new forms of old elisions and exclusions premised on the supremacy of able-bodied perspectives and ideologies.

### **‘Franklin’s Illness’: Towards a Critical Disability Studies Perspective on Disability History**

In November of 1999, the National Organization on Disability organized a committee of disability studies scholars charged with helping the National Park Service and Lawrence Halprin decide on an engraving to accompany the new addition. Scholars on the assembled inscription committee understood that the quotation accompanying the “Prologue” addition would likely play a decisive role in audience interpretation. In a November 4, 1999 letter to the National Organization on Disability’s president Alan Reich, inscription committee chair Scott Sandage explained:

Any chosen inscription will raise both historical and political problems. The challenge is to select words that will inspire and retain their meaning for—literally—centuries to come. Ways of talking about people with disabilities have changed in the last 50 years and will continue to change. The inscription needs to be universal enough to encompass those unforeseen changes, yet specific enough to draw proper attention to FDR’s disability.<sup>66</sup>

Sandage then suggested as a possible candidate a line from a 1936 speech by FDR in Little Rock, Arkansas. The quote from Roosevelt’s speech would eventually become the committee’s consensus choice to accompany the addition. Roosevelt stated: “We know that equality of individual ability has never existed and never will, but we do insist that equality of opportunity still must be sought.”<sup>67</sup>

In its final report to the National Park Service in February of 2000, the committee detailed its criteria for selecting a quote to accompany the new statue of FDR in his wheelchair. The criteria reveal the influence of the disability rights movement and of disability studies in helping to forge critical new understandings of disability while also clarifying what is at stake in the public interpretation of FDR’s disability. Under “Themes to Emphasize” the committee offered:

1. That disability is integral to a person’s character and life experience, rather than a defect to be eliminated;
2. That the experience of a disability can enrich a life, foster leadership, and create community;
3. That FDR’s struggle makes him an accessible person, rather than a lofty hero.<sup>68</sup>

“Themes to Avoid” included:

1. That disability is defined by individual impairment, rather than by social attitudes and environmental barriers;
2. That disability is only a tragic experience to be overcome;
3. That the disabled warrant attention only to provide lessons or inspirations to others.<sup>69</sup>

The committee then offered its unanimous choice from the 1936 Little Rock speech referenced previously, adding that the quote “was the most inspirational and appropriate, by far.”<sup>70</sup>

The report ended with six additional quotes for the National Park Service and Halprin to consider. Committee members emphasized explicitly that each of these additional possibilities violated its own criteria in some way and that its top suggestion was the only quote to conform to all criteria.<sup>71</sup> For instance, though the inscription committee insisted that a quote from someone other than FDR himself would not be ideal, its members nonetheless offered a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt’s autobiography as a possible, but less than ideal, option. “Franklin’s illness,” Eleanor wrote in 1949, “gave him strength and courage he had not had before. He had to think out the fundamentals of living and learn the greatest of all lessons-infinite patience and never-ending persistence.”<sup>73</sup>

Much to the committee’s dismay, this quote became the final (and only) choice of the National Park Service and Lawrence Halprin. In a June 26, 2000 letter to John Parsons of the National Park Service, the committee urged that the selection of Eleanor Roosevelt’s quote be re-considered. The committee emphasized that its top recommendation of a quote from FDR underscoring equality of opportunity would make the new room more consistent with the rest of the memorial, not just because FDR speaks for himself throughout the memorial, but also because “It asks audiences to join in not taking equality for granted. It teaches that expanding and preserving equality is a joint, civic duty that must never end.”<sup>73</sup>

Reflecting on the inscription committee’s efforts in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, committee member Rosemarie Garland-Thomson contended in January of 2001 that the quote ultimately selected to accompany the statue would not likely stand the test of

time. “While the designers of the FDR memorial have laudably affirmed disability with the depiction of the president using a wheelchair,” Garland-Thomson wrote, “they did not succeed in re-writing the story of disability in terms that will resonate for future generations.”<sup>74</sup> Noting that the memorial’s present and future audiences would include those whose consciousness had been transformed by civil rights movements that included the disability rights movement, Garland-Thomson insisted that the memorial must not persist in casting disability merely as a “personal problem rather than a public political struggle.” Assessing the chosen quote’s impact on the addition, Garland-Thomson concluded: “The addition to the FDR memorial suggests two conflicting stories: yesterday’s story of disability as a personal failing overcome by individual effort, and today’s and tomorrow’s story of disability as an issue of civil rights, integration, and diversity.”<sup>75</sup>

The interpretive challenges faced by the inscription committee illustrate the need for sustained engagement by disability studies scholars in public histories of disability and also shows the value of using queerness and disability studies perspectives to inform that engagement. For instance, Garland-Thomson argued that the quote ultimately inscribed at the memorial resonated with audiences largely because it appealed to familiar stereotypes of disability rapidly retreating from public consciousness. Arguably however, the quote’s appeal did not lie solely in its reprisal of familiar disability stereotypes. Rather, the quote’s resonance also stemmed from the fact that it served the political imperatives and neoliberal ideologies of the late 1990s and early 2000s. As noted earlier, these neoliberal ideologies worked to incorporate the disabled body of FDR into public history on terms favorable to able-bodied privilege, the destruction of the New Deal, and de-politicizing disability by casting in terms of courageous and private, rather than collective, struggle.

For example, in remarks reminiscent of Berlant's notion of infantile citizenship, National Organization on Disability president Alan Reich heralded the installment of a wheelchair statue at the memorial by stating that the addition forged "an argument in bronze that [in America] people can overcome circumstances and become great."<sup>76</sup> Among those present to hear Reich speak at the re-dedication of the memorial in January of 2001 was a 4-year old disabled Albanian immigrant who, according to one press account in *Disability World*, "didn't need anyone to explain the statue's significance to her." The article continues, quoting the new immigrant, "it means people on crutches or in a wheelchair can do anything."<sup>77</sup> Such discourses saturated the FDR Memorial's addition, consistently depicting Roosevelt as what Joseph Shapiro famously called the ultimate "supercrip," one who saved the nation, embodied national challenges, and continues to inspire through the ages.

Rising in support of the Senate Resolution to depict FDR in his wheelchair, Senator Tom Harkin (co-author the American with Disabilities Act) concluded that the addition of a wheelchair statue stood as clear evidence that disability "in no way diminishes the ability of person to fully participate in all aspects of American life."<sup>78</sup> Such rhetoric suggests that FDR lead the nation out of unprecedented economic tumult not through a re-ordering of government or with his commitment to expanding the public sector to meet human needs and respect the demands of a highly politicized populous calling for change. Instead, it is FDR's *individual* courage and private struggle which animated change and saved the nation. This "overcoming" then becomes an inspirational narrative that elides systematic injustices. As Shapiro explains, "While prodigious achievement is praiseworthy in anyone, disabled or not, it does not reflect the day-to-day reality of most disabled people, who struggle constantly with smaller challenges, such as finding a bus with a wheelchair lift to go downtown or

fighting beliefs that people with disabilities cannot work, be educated, or enjoy life as well as anyone else.”<sup>79</sup>

The analysis of contemporary neoliberalism offered by queer disability studies scholars Abbey L. Wilkerson and Robert McRuer broadens Shapiro’s concept to show how “disabled” bodies are employed to justify neoliberal policies that actually work against the interests of persons who fail in some way to comport with normative standards of embodiment. Such analysis also shows how narratives of disability advanced by the scholars on the inscription committee might be enhanced by queer studies critiques of disability representation. If it is to truly challenge disability oppression, than visualizing disability in history much be about much more than, as Garland-Thomson argued, “civil rights, integration, and diversity.” Rather, such visualizations must also challenge the cultural narratives of disability which work to disavow the radical implications of disability’s presence in history by acknowledging and embracing the more interdependent social order that disability implies. Such an order would not automatically equate individual worth with economic value or regard bodily variation as something to be either excluded or assimilated into society.

While disability studies critiques of traditional histories of disability have been crucial to moving us beyond a “medical model” of disability as something to be cured, the FDR in a Wheelchair campaign and the discursive formations of disability it fostered suggests the ways in which disability studies remains a field in transition from the social model of rights and inclusion to a queer disability studies model that more aggressively challenges the terms and costs of that inclusion. In the concluding section of this chapter, I want to suggest how we might begin to make just such a move towards a “queer” visuality of

disability in public history that critiques both the medical model of disability and the normalizing model of heroic and exceptional inclusion advanced by the FDR in Wheelchair campaign. I contend that by working to challenge popular historical narratives of FDR's polio, the 2005 exhibition *Whatever Happened to Polio* staged at the National Museum of American History provides a glimpse of how visual culture studies as well current scholarship on queerness and disability can productively inform and shape histories of disability for public consumption not premised on the ability disabled historic figures to conform to able-bodied and heteronormative standards.

### **Conclusion: Re-Presenting FDR's Polio at the Museum**

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's experience of polio is represented several times in the 2005 Smithsonian Exhibition *Whatever Happened to Polio*. In this section, I examine some of these "re-presentations" of Roosevelt's polio. I focus specifically on the ways in which material artifacts in the exhibition interact with visual images of Roosevelt to create a history of the president's polio that is not dependent on normalizing narratives of "overcoming" disability in order to achieve able-bodied status. In addition, I show how visual culture studies and disability studies work together to produce a history of FDR's polio grounded in non-able-bodied perspectives. I conclude this section by again considering how queer perspectives on disability enhance and complicate the presentation of disability in history by exposing the ways in which visual culture seeks to define disability in terms of heteronormative expectations and dualistic binaries of normal and abnormal, able and disabled.

Describing the polio exhibition in the journal *Public History* in 2006, Historian and disability studies scholar David Serlin observed: "Instead of merely replicating the

triumphalist narratives of Western medical success, the exhibit reclaims the physical and social experience of the disabled body.”<sup>80</sup> For curators of the Smithsonian’s *Whatever Happened to Polio* exhibition, capturing the social and physical experience of FDR’s polio meant confronting and complicating triumphalist narratives of Roosevelt’s disability. In the process, the curators of 2005 polio exhibition and its online counterpart challenged conceptions of disability as a private, personal struggle situated outside of the realms of society, culture, politics, and community norms of inclusion/exclusion. Principal curator Katherine Ott observed in 2006 that the exhibition “picks up where the FDR Memorial left off, since in the polio exhibit we put FDR in the context of other people who had polio rather than other great presidents or other great Americans.”<sup>81</sup> Confounding the narratives of exceptionalism and greatness surrounding Roosevelt also entailed raising political questions about power, exclusion, and identity that traditional disability narratives of overcoming and triumph obscure or erase. Reflecting upon her work on a year 2000 exhibition marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Ott spoke to the implications of creating histories of struggle not premised on the veneration of a few famous or remarkable leaders who able to obtain able-bodied position or privilege. Ott argued that medical model narratives of disability as something to be overcome work hand in hand with “stereotypes of triumph and heroism” to fashion disability as a personal and privatized, rather than social and political issue.<sup>82</sup> A visual analysis of artifacts and images on FDR in the polio exhibition suggests how narratives of conquest over disability not only erase the history of political struggle around disability in the U.S., but also evacuate from consideration the ways in which that history has been experienced and shaped along lines of race, class, gender, and social exclusion and inclusion.



FDR first appears in the exhibition in an “FDR” section devoted to his significant role in the modern history of polio. Reviewing the exhibition in the journal *The Public Historian*, Brien Williams described his encounter with one of the FDR section’s central images. The photograph depicts Roosevelt, Williams tells readers, “not in glory but sitting alone on the tile floor beside one of the pools at Warm Springs, dressed only in a bathing suit and laughing unselfconsciously.”<sup>83</sup> Williams then admits to readers that he did not recognize the president in this image at first adding that once he did identify Roosevelt as the photo’s subject the effect was “totally disarming and humanizing.”<sup>84</sup> The fact that Williams failed to recognize FDR at first and then finds the image “disarming and humanizing” testifies to the photograph’s capacity to challenge popular perceptions of Roosevelt as a commanding president whose “glory” and position in history effectively cloaked his disability in the blandishments of power. While opponents of the FDR Memorial’s wheelchair statue addition feared that frank depictions of FDR’s polio might undermine his authority in history, curators of the polio exhibition viewed such portrayals as essential to contextualizing Roosevelt’s role in the history of polio. The image shows Roosevelt supporting himself with large, overdeveloped arms. His legs withered and atrophied. He appears beaming and relaxed as though it might be on vacation rather than at a rehabilitation facility. A caption accompanying the photo features FDR biographer Hugh Gallagher describing Roosevelt’s approach to rehabilitation at Warm Springs. “From the first,” observes Gallagher, “Roosevelt seemed to understand that rehabilitation of the polio patient was a social problem with medical aspects. It was not a medical problem with social aspects.”<sup>85</sup> A quote from Roosevelt himself also accompanies this photograph: “Once you’ve spent two years trying to wiggle one toe, everything else is in proportion.”<sup>86</sup>

This image of FDR at Warm Springs thus places him within what Gallagher describes elsewhere in the FDR section as “a community of the handicapped. A permanent population of polios.”<sup>87</sup> The polio exhibit’s FDR section also features a photograph of Roosevelt in front of a microphone at the Institute for the Crippled and Disabled in 1928. In this image he appears standing upright but is clearly supported by a cane on his right side. His left arm is interlocked firmly with his son Jimmy’s arm. He is flanked on both sides by men using crutches and canes for support. The image not only situates Roosevelt with a larger disabled community, it subtly but powerfully suggests the political power of that community as well as its raced, classed, and gendered terms of inclusion. Roosevelt, who was running for Governor of New York at the time, is dressed in formal attire as are the men around him. His position at the microphone is suggestive of his public influence as well as the influence and position of those around him. Taken together, these images of Roosevelt on the campaign trail and at Warm Springs suggest that Roosevelt’s polio was not a detriment to his political career that he was forced to hide from the camera, as Carter Brown and other critics of the memorial statue addition argued. Rather, these images narrate the ways in which Roosevelt’s polio was actually a powerful political asset which he manipulated *for* the camera.

At the same time, the photo of Roosevelt at the microphone surrounded by other well-dressed white men and civic leaders with disabilities subtly suggest how Roosevelt’s experience of disability, as well as his presentation of that disability, did not exist outside questions of power and position. That Roosevelt used his considerable influence and privilege to affect change around polio and improve the lives of those living with polio is a theme that runs throughout the exhibition. The theme of FDR’s positive impact on polio is consistently complicated however, both by the exhibition’s presentations of FDR himself,

and by other parts of the exhibition which call into question “universal” narratives of the historical experience of polio. The image of FDR at the Warm Springs pool, for instance, is problematized by another image in the FDR section depicting African-American children being treated for polio and the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The photo’s caption notes that black patients were not admitted to Warm Springs. In fact, although black Americans played a crucial role in caring for patients at Warm Springs, the Tuskegee facility was the only one in the entire south which provided care for black polio patients.<sup>87</sup>



**Figure 2. FDR at Warm Springs, Whatever Happened to Polio Exhibition, 2005.**



**Figure 3. FDR at the Institute for the Crippled and Disabled (1928), Whatever Happened to Polio Exhibition, 2005.**

The “FDR” section also features material objects that underscore the complexities of collective struggle and national community while highlighting the political skill with which Roosevelt framed and deployed his own disability. For instance, a piece of cake from 1934, a souvenir from President Roosevelt’s Birthday Balls held annually to raise funds for the care of polio patients, is featured along with text explaining that the balls were so successful that in 1938 they were merged into the national organization that eventually became the March of Dimes.



**Figure 4. Slice of FDR's birthday cake (1934) Whatever Happened to Polio Exhibition, 2005.**

The birthday cake underscores FDR's political prowess and is featured along-side other "Birthday Ball" artifacts that suggests the ways in which that prowess was constrained by raced, gendered, and able-bodied norms. For instance, a 1935 Birthday Ball poster features a young woman wrapped in the American flag above a banner that reads "Our President's Birthday." The woman embraces a young child on either side of her—a boy on one side, a young girl on the other. The woman and children appear normatively gendered and racialized as white. The girl holds a portrait of Roosevelt depicting him from the neck up.<sup>88</sup>



Figure 5. Birthday Ball poster to raise funds for polio research (1935), Whatever Happened to Polio Exhibition, 2005.

This image reflects a particular kind of national belonging characteristic of public history. National histories typically standardize the people represented in them. Representations of disability in popular culture similarly tend to focus on normative stereotypes of triumph and pity (think here of Chris Reeve, Ryan White, and Jerry Kids). As Katherine Ott observes, “civic representations of peoples in the past tend to make them healthy, hygienic, kind—and racially pure. They mirror the finest attributes of a strong and powerful nation-state—might makes right.”<sup>89</sup> With its explicit civic purpose, patriotic imagery, and raced and gendered invocations of a hygienic, healthy populace commemorating “Our President,” the Birthday Ball poster exemplifies heteronormative public history.

Other parts of the polio exhibit question the normative terms of including disabled bodies in history much more explicitly. For instance, the exhibit’s “Disability Rights” section features an image of March of Dimes poster child Cindy Jones on crutches next to an image of two presumably healthy and able-bodied children at play. A tag reminiscent of a grocery store circular is posted next to the children reading “THIS.” A similar tag is applied to Jones’ image exclaiming “NOT THIS.” This poster specifies its audience as those with children urging them to “Vaccinate Your Family Now Against Polio!” An audio narrative from Jones was included with the image. In it, Jones describes the shock, pain, and radicalizing effect that being labeled “NOT THIS” had on her. “I still feel the sense of hurt and betrayal,” she wrote, “I was cute, intelligent, even sparkled. How could they say that about me? That day I became an activist.”<sup>90</sup>



**Figure 6. March of Dimes poster child Cindy Jones portrayed as “Not This,” Whatever Happened to Polio Exhibition, 2005.**

The image of Jones as “NOT THIS” is coupled with another image of Jones. Printed in a St. Louis newspaper in 1956, it features a man with Jones in her wheelchair to his left and another little girl, also in a wheelchair, to the man’s right. The three are situated in front of a giant American flag. The man is wearing a sash that reads “TONIGHT I AM A MOTHER.” This photo again invokes images of patriotic pride and civic responsibility. This time, however, tropes of gender and feminine domesticity are brought into stark relief and then turned on their head by the masculine presentation of the photo’s central figure. Flanked by disabled children, the man is rendered a “mother” even as he appears in requisite hat, tie, and coat. Taken together, these images show how representations of disability are framed and influenced by notions of gender and sexuality. Despite being “cute” and sparkling, the first image suggests Jones’ polio places her outside of the norms of the “healthy” able-bodied heterosexual family. The poster’s explicit message is that families who fail to vaccinate their children could render those children both undesirable (no matter their appearance) and



ineligible for admission in U.S. society. The second image enfolds Jones into a family narrative where gender roles are inverted. This second image thus exposes how audiences expect to see a woman in the role of caretaker for the sick and subtly suggest how disability can disrupt audience expectations of gender.



**Figure 7. Cindy Jones (Left) *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (1956), Whatever Happened to Polio Exhibition, 2005.**

As these contrasting images of Cindy Jones illustrate, material objects and images help audiences re-think and re-imagine culturally-ascribed and deeply entrenched perceptions of American history. Museums are institutions entrenched within processes of knowledge production and reception that are themselves entangled within cultures and practices of normativity and violence. Displaying a postcard image from 1907 depicting the marriage of Pocahontas to John Rolfe curator Ott told an audience in 2005 “In Washington today, we like

our history simple, straight (in every sense of the word) and G rated, except violence is okay if done in defense of our borders, or way of life, or freedom”<sup>91</sup> Ott continued:

Public History has always been constrained by pressure to commemorate the past and contain controversy. Presenting static utopias with no conflict is always preferred by some people, especially those with a lot of power and influence. Our audiences at the Smithsonian, are the millions of people who are products of this culture, as I am certainly. So generally, in order reach and teach them, we have to give them enough of the familiar to get the attention and feel basically competent, before encouraging them to rethink what they already know or explore something new.<sup>92</sup>

If the image of Pocahontas marrying John Rolfe typifies conversant white colonialist fantasies of a unified nation uncomplicated by differences, the decision to place FDR’s leg braces in the “Rehabilitation” section of the polio exhibit illustrates how familiar objects and images, properly framed, can prompt new ways of understanding history. Ott described this specific decision to the journal *Public History* as both “a political statement” and “an interpretive historical statement.”<sup>93</sup> Ott told the journal’s David Serlin “We have one pair of leg braces, and they belonged to FDR, because that’s enough to tell the story of leg braces. We have hundreds of hundreds of braces and crutches in the museum’s collections, but we consciously chose not to use many of them because we did not want the exhibit to be about technology or fetishes.”<sup>94</sup> In addition, Ott explained, curators chose not to put the braces in the “FDR” section. This choice strategically de-emphasizes heroic narratives of Roosevelt’s polio, placing him within the larger medical and social story of polio.<sup>95</sup>

The re-presentations of FDR’s polio in the Whatever Happened to Polio exhibit reveal how the disabled body in particular is not simply an index of physical attributes, but also a social construction whose meanings are inherently contingent and fraught with the culturally ascribed assumptions and ideals—as well as the dynamics of power, knowledge, and difference—that help shape and constitute both the disabled body and its “social

experience.” These presentations of Roosevelt’s polio disclose how fears about representing FDR’s wheelchair use at the memorial to his presidency were, in fact, deeply enmeshed in cultural assumptions about gender, ability, and economic and aesthetic value.

That presenting FDR in his wheelchair would politicize the memorial, serve as a “re-do” of history, and mean that the president would be seen as a weak and enfeebled leader, were all central arguments of those opposed to amending the memorial. In response, proponents of the wheelchair argued that the wheelchair made FDR strong and demonstrated the “ability” of disabled Americans to be successful on an able-bodied and patriarchal society’s terms. The *Whatever Happened to Polio* exhibition, however, demonstrated a third approach; one that exposed the normative and gendered assumptions that undergird the heroic narratives of FDR’s disability presented by advocates for the memorial addition. Writing in the *Public Historian* in 2005, Ott elaborated on her approach to historicizing disability:

Much of the history of exhibition practice encompasses the history of the display of human bodies, whether in anthropological fairs, on minstrel stages, or in natural history museums, historic houses, or freak sideshows. These longstanding traditions of representation sometimes conflict with attempts to provide contemporary presentations. There are historical conventions that subtly and not so subtly influence both what the public expects to see and how they interpret the bodies they do see in exhibitions.<sup>96</sup>

This reflection on how practices of representing the body shape, and are in turn shaped by, processes of knowledge production and reception suggest the ways in which rendering bodies for public consumption has long served a number of social, political, and regulatory functions. References to “anthropological fairs,” “minstrel stages,” and “freak sideshows” register historical and cultural endeavors centered on discerning, specifying, and containing physical differences. Moreover, conventional exhibitionary practices implicitly tie such

practices (and the policing and consumption of bodily variation they enact) to larger national projects of racialization and differentiation intended to distinguish the “normal” body from the “abnormal” body via modes of visualization that are profoundly embedded within dominant cultural norms and standards. How disability is portrayed (or not portrayed) in history is directly related to dominant cultural norms, values, and ideologies. These include how success and achievement are defined, how wealth is generated and distributed, the boundaries of community acceptance of difference, and perceptions age, race, gender, and sex.<sup>97</sup> Ott and her team’s incisive recognition of this reality decisively shaped the *Whatever Happened to Polio* exhibition; an exhibition that originally conceived of as a medical history of polio before Ott became lead curator following the passing of her colleague Patricia Gossel who originally headed the project.

In a 2004 memo to National Museum of American History Director Brent Glass and Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs Jim Gardner, Ott advocated for a section of the exhibition devoted to helping visitors interpret and contextualize the exhibition’s myriad images of people with polio. The idea for a section designated for interpreting images from the exhibit “grew out of concerns about the graphic power” of many of the exhibition’s images and competing photographic genres. Many of the images in the exhibition such as those of March of Dimes “poster” children or young polio patients in rehabilitation hospitals would clearly be problematic for visitors if presented without comment on the specific aesthetic genre they represent.<sup>98</sup> Recognizing this, Ott provided a detailed outline of the proposed “Understanding Historical Photos” section. The outline included several examples of the kinds of images from the exhibit that would require ample context in order to avoid dehumanizing the people presented in them.

One image from a 1917 medical textbook features a young girl wearing only a diaper. The photo's point of entry is the white-coated arm of a medical doctor. The doctor's hand reaches for the girl's arm as she appears to push away. Ott's suggested caption for the photo explains: "The patient's context is missing because it was not important for the image's intended audience. Consequently, the photograph captures assumptions about the doctor-patient relationship, power, and the vulnerability of those who are ill."<sup>99</sup>

This caption is further contextualized for viewers through the use of autobiographical texts created by polio survivors such as Don Kirkendall. A brief passage from Kirkendall's memoir of polio accompanies the photograph of the girl and describes his reaction to comments about him directed to others, perhaps his mother. "He's pretty lightweight for a ten-year old, isn't he ma'am?...I'll carry the boy down the steps if you can manage your bags.' It began then, the feeling of being treated like a thing."<sup>100</sup> A passage from Lorenzo Milam's autobiographical account of polio is also presented along with the photo of the anonymous young girl. Milam, who contracted polio in his late teens and later went on to establish several of the nation's first listener-supported radio stations, describes an experience in a polio ward.

"Medical student without consultation pulls down the sheet over naked me. I don't even know him and he is undressing me without my specific permission. I am wracked, and yet I remember thinking, 'I don't want them looking at me without my clothes, not at all' But no one is listening to me. My body is no longer my own."<sup>101</sup>

Milam and Kirkendall's poignant descriptions of objectification and humiliation reveal how the people captured in the polio exhibition's medical and rehabilitative photographs existed within a cultural, social, and historical matrix that extends well-beyond the frame of institutional images. The captions thus aid viewers in placing these images within the context

of clinical knowledge production about polio while also underscoring the dehumanizing aspects of the medical gaze that such knowledge production often entailed.

Describing the need for such captions, Ott explained to colleagues: “In exhibits, we seldom draw attention to how we as curators make sense of and choose the images we put in exhibits. We generally treat images as unproblematic and reflective of literal truth.”<sup>102</sup>

Although the section on reading historical photos was ultimately not included in the physical exhibition, it is featured in the exhibition’s online counterpart.<sup>103</sup> Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to argue that analyzing depictions of FDR’s polio for public consumption from a critical visual culture and queer disability studies perspective reveals precisely how visualizations of disability in public history are not “reflective of literal truth.” Instead, such portrayals are informed by expectations and norms of gender, sexuality and ability. They alternately reflect, bolster, and challenge the political and ideological moments in which they are created. In so doing, these representations can expose the normative terms for including people with disabilities in history and either challenge those terms, as the Whatever Happened to Polio Exhibition showcases, or accept those terms as some who championed the FDR Memorial Wheelchair statue addition did.

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### **Chapter 3: Re-Presenting Disability at the Smithsonian: A Crip/Queer Analysis**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter analyzes two exhibitions on the history of disability in the United States produced by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. I consider the material objects, visual images, life stories, and historical narratives found in a 2000 exhibition marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act and a 2013 digital exhibition entitled *Everybody: An Artifact History of Disability in America*. I argue that, rather than merely defying negative cultural stereotypes or working to correct the historical record around disability, these exhibitions challenge audiences to consider the ways in which disability is an inherently *political* social and cultural formation affixed to questions of identity, community, autonomy, and social and economic value which are inextricably bound up with dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In this way, I contend, these exhibitions help to expose and render transparent the social and cultural production of "disability" in the United States. Accordingly, I offer a visual analysis of these exhibitions informed by queer disability studies that reveals how disability and those with disabilities have been consistently imagined, represented, and demarcated over and against heteronormative and able-bodied norms, standards, and expectations of who, and what, counts as "American." In so doing, I show how and why the history of disability in the United States must not simply be viewed as one marked by efforts to achieve equal rights and inclusion for those with disabilities. Rather, the history of disability in the U.S. must also be understood as a history of resistance to the heteronormative and able-bodied terms of social, cultural, and political inclusion for those with disabilities in American society.

Thus, when viewed through a crip/queer lens, these exhibitions not only allow for a thorough interrogation of medical models of disability as something “in” the body and “outside” the social, but also confound, and productively complicate, the minority identity and civil rights models of disability deployed both by the disability rights movement and its intellectual corollary disability studies. This is because I show how the artifacts in these exhibits argue against viewing the history of disability in the United States exclusively from a minority rights perspective. Rather, the images, artifacts, and historical narratives of disability I assess in these exhibits question the deployment of disability by the state as an organizing category of identity and eschew notions of a shared disability history to focus us instead on the ways in which identifying the disabled as a distinct group has been a regularizing and normalizing project inflected by norms of race, class, gender, and sexuality and powered by a drive to erase differences that call into question the violent normativities of a heteropatriarchal U.S. nation-state that demands able-bodiedness, defines success in terms of wealth, beauty, and power, and marks for death or exploits for profit those bodies and persons that do not measure up. Given the history of state violence against the disabled that these artifacts uncover, I argue that disability historians, scholars, and activists are better served by a queer model of disability history which questions identification and identity, and the normalizing uses to which these are put, rather than a minority model premised on advancing a logic of “different” but equal that ultimately leaves unquestioned the normalizing tenants of a liberal democracy that consistently holds up inclusion, integration, and assimilation of differences as the *fin de siècle* of social justice struggles.

Indeed, I claim that these exhibitions uncover how “crip” has always been “hip” to this reality. In fact, when viewed through a crip/queer lens, the content of these exhibitions

demonstrates that the disability rights movement itself should not be understood primarily as a struggle to achieve rights and inclusion, change disability's negative public image to eliminate "attitudinal" barriers, or even as a movement to remove architectural barriers. Instead, I illustrate how the material and visual representations of disability found in these exhibitions suggests a social movement that sought to fundamentally challenge the "common sense" assumptions that link compulsory able-bodiedness, individualism, heterosexuality, and capitalism to notions of happiness, health, success, and living a "normal" life. The insight that disability does not produce the inability to enter a building, get a job, or lead a full life—but that in fact, normative presumptions of able-bodiedness produce disability and its effects—marks a key contribution of the disability rights movement and disability studies that challenges us to re-think, not just architecture or educational policy, but all of the normalizing assumptions on which those things are based including the idea that we must all aspire to be graded by the same report card, measure up to the same standard of cognitive, sensory, or physical ability, or have a job in order to have a life worth living.

In this way, I aim to encourage new epistemologies of disability history rooted neither in heteropatriarchal, able-bodied conceptions of disability as a character building exercise in overcoming limitations nor in integrationist, heteronormative, white nationalist visions of American exceptionalism that posit disability as yet another difference to be symbolically included in, and then ultimately assimilated to, the profit-driven, normalizing interests of contemporary neoliberal capitalist American democracy. Instead, the queerness and disability studies reading of these exhibitions I offer here points towards a crip/queer politics of anti-capitalist struggle premised on resistance to heteronormativity rather than accession to the able-bodied heteropatriarchal terms of inclusion in U.S. society.

For instance, explicit and repeated references to the African-American civil rights movement as well as the Americans with Disability Act and other legislative landmarks combine in each of these exhibitions with photographs, artifacts, and ephemera that divulge histories of past and present-day resistance to compulsory able-bodiedness and heteronormativity as the benchmarks to which all Americans—even the disabled—supposedly aspire. Iconographies of civil disobedience and public political struggle work with items and images of forced incarceration, sterilization, dispossession, psychiatric trauma, and extermination to re-frame disability from a problem within individuals to be corrected by scientific, technological, and medical advances to a set of social, political, cultural, and material conditions that have worked not simply to exclude people with disabilities from full participation in American life, but also to eradicate, contain, and regulate physical, cognitive, and sensory variation in ways that violently privilege white supremacist able-bodied heterosexuality as the norm against which every(body) in America is judged. In this way, these exhibits compel us to contemplate the costs, consequences, and complexities of integrating difference into American society while also offering up fresh imaginaries of disability politics, dissent, and social change not premised on teleological narratives of historical progress or on the construction and mobilization of an easily discernable “disability identity” that treats normative structures of affiliation, “community,” and inclusion as irreducible prerequisites to social change and social justice for those with disabilities.

If visibility expresses the relationship between representation and power, then the analysis of the Smithsonian’s recent disability history exhibits I offer in this chapter attempts to demonstrate how the queer visualities of disability made possible by these exhibitions

provide a forceful corrective to the material embodiments of disability considered in previous chapters. While the Keller statue and coin script ritualistic attempts by the State of Alabama to erase from the visual frame of public history the myriad differences and non-normativities produced by Helen Keller's multiple disabilities, the FDR Memorial's wheelchair statue recites a rite (and right) of inclusion in public history that presupposes one's ability to not only meet, but to exceed, able-bodied and heteronormative standards. The Disability Rights Movement and Everybody exhibitions, on the other hand, at once flout these modes of representing disability by insisting that people with disabilities need not meet any particular standard of worthiness and enrich our understanding of them by showing how disability is a complicated and unstable historical and cultural designation that has been consistently framed and re-framed in U.S. history and culture in ways that demonstrate how, to recall Judith Butler, the "matter" of bodies truly has mattered in history.<sup>1</sup> In proposing that a "queer visibility" of disability be applied to histories of disability then, I am not suggesting that "queers" have a particular way of viewing the world that historians and scholars of disability should take seriously. I am advocating for a methodological approach to disability history that focuses on the non-normative, the questioning, and that which disrupts cultural and historical knowledges of disability grounded in able-bodied, heteronormative perspectives which systematically work to devalue, contain, normalize, or erase those with disabilities.

Following this introduction, I offer a brief exploration of the artifacts and images in these exhibits that render histories of violence against those with disabilities and expose the suppression and regulation of physical and cognitive difference in the United States. I utilize Henry Giroux's concept of neoliberalism as a system of cultural knowledge production that



enacts what Giroux calls “a biopolitics of disposability” as well as Paul Longmore’s critique of the “crippling economy” in order to consider how the images and artifacts of bodily regulation found in these exhibits forge a starting point for understanding the political stakes of presenting disability in histories for public consumption. I argue that by confronting the sometimes subtle, often explicit, and always systematic containment and disposal of disabled people in the U.S., my crip/queer interpretation of these artifact histories of disability paves the way for a more critical consideration of disability rights and inclusion.

I then move to an examination of the civil rights narratives in these exhibitions. I demonstrate how curators explicitly frame civil rights and disability rights in terms of citizenship. I argue that presenting disability as a question of citizenship can confound triumphal white-heteronormative linear histories of disability rights and inclusion when we understand that “citizenship” and inclusion continues to be denied to those who do not, will not, or cannot live up nondisabled normative standards of citizenship. My reading of these exhibitions not only reveals how contests over disability rights and inclusion are ongoing struggles not relegated to the past, but also, that securing rights and social justice for people with disabilities is not as simple as finding ways to include them under the umbrella of an ostensibly more pluralistic and “tolerant” U.S. nation-state. Rather, the able-bodied, raced, classed, and heteronormative terms of “tolerance” and inclusion must also be challenged. My assessment of these artifacts suggests that disability activists have been challenging normative models of inclusion all along. But the minority identity model of disability history occludes this struggle by suggesting that political and social inclusion of a disabled minority, rather than fundamental social and cultural transformation, has been the aim of a movement that is almost exclusively referred to, and understood as, “the disability rights movement.”

I do not want to discount or diminish the power and significance of civil rights narratives, strategies, and tactics for people with disabilities systematically denied those rights. I do want to suggest, however, that appeals to the state for rights and inclusion—including those made by those with disabilities—must be viewed with an eye towards whether such appeals leave intact or, worse still, reify and naturalize raced, classed, and able-bodied norms and exclusions of citizenship or whether they seek to challenge those norms through a rejection of the normalizing boundaries of citizenship. A focus on those histories that challenge normalizing citizenship, I argue, expands our understanding of disability history by showing that this history is far richer, more complex, and more radical than civil rights frame alone allows us to see. In addition, I contend, celebratory histories of securing rights and inclusion that fail to acknowledge the continued denial of rights and inclusion to those deemed “unfit” for citizenship run the risks of installing white, heteronormative citizen-subjects as center of disability history.

I conclude by examining artifacts and narratives from the “Everybody” exhibit that reveal how disability and impairment can perform a politics of interdependency that calls into question cherished notions of individualism and able-bodiedness as prerequisites for economic “success,” aesthetic value, and social worth. I argue that, by prompting us to think about how bodies are socially, culturally, and historically constructed, the items, images, and narratives of embodiment found in the Everybody exhibition permit histories and knowledges of disability that expose how able-bodiedness is a fiction of modern neoliberal capitalism that works to facilitate the systematic valuing and devaluing of particular bodies while naturalizing the profound inequalities produced by the demarcation of “desirable” and

“undesirable” bodies. In so doing, these artifacts reveal an on-going history of anti-capitalist crip/queer struggle against normativity.

My decision to spotlight and uncover the queer, non-heteronormative histories of disability made possible by these exhibitions is one shaped, both by my ambition to bring the insights of queerness and disability studies to bear on public histories of disability, and by the unique opportunities afforded by public history as a contemporary arena for the production and reception of cultural and historical knowledge about disability. While public history has rightly been understood, and vigorously critiqued, as a site for the production of normative citizenship, it is also a place where non-normative histories and critical assessments of citizenship can come to light. Acting on Douglas Baynton’s famous injunction that “disability is everywhere in history once you begin looking for it,” I want to locate those instances of disability in history that queer heteronormative assumptions about who and what counts as American and worthy of commemoration.<sup>2</sup>

Looking, as I do here, at disability through a crip/queer scope is crucial to locating this radical history. This is because curators and producers of public history exhibitions face the difficult task of both appealing to broad audiences and challenging those audiences to rethink popular assumptions about a given historical event or history of events. This often means presenting multiple, conflicting, and confounding historical perspectives within a single exhibition. When done well, this approach to public history at once permits polysemous readings of history that attend to the sundry perspectives and expectations of diverse audiences and allows scholars and visitors alike space for questioning dominant conceptions of a given history by presenting alternative outlooks and angles on that history which may be unfamiliar, or otherwise unavailable, to public audiences.<sup>3</sup> What visitors take

away from these exhibits then, is not only a function of curatorial choices, but also of the perspectives and expectations that audiences bring with them.

Herein lies the opportunity for public history to produce new knowledges rather than reifying old ones. As both a scholar and an audience member, I bring my own investments and viewpoints to these exhibits. My arguments are served by the exhibitionary content I choose to explicate. As Amy Brandzel reminds us, “[S]cholarship is always political; whatever we are looking for necessarily defines and limits what we find.”<sup>4</sup> In looking for the queer histories of disability made possible by these exhibits, I aim to find those histories and narratives of disability in the United States that depict disability in America, not as a struggle by disabled people to be or become “normal,” but as a struggle to challenge those notions of the “normal” that define and regulate people with disabilities. In so doing, I hope to move the politics of disability representation beyond the reductive and normalizing binaries of “positive” and “negative” images of disability. Instead, I wish to focus attention on the ways in which notions of “positive” and “negative” are invariably shaped by heteronormative ideas about what constitutes a “positive” or “negative” image, an “able” or “disabled” body, a “good” or “bad” life. In this way, I hope to expand our thinking about the disability rights movement and about disability studies; projects both founded on “re-presenting” disability to public audiences.

### **Re-Defining Disability History**

In 1973 the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History (then called the National Museum of History and Technology) launched an exhibition entitled “Triumph Over Disability.” The exhibit chronicled the development of rehabilitative medicine in the United States and featured an array of medical, rehabilitative, and corrective

devices which cast disability exclusively as a medical problem that “for thousands of years” has been addressed through medical and technological interventions.<sup>5</sup> An introduction to the exhibition for visitors began by asserting “Most newborns are normal; that is, they have all the parts that will be required of them to perform all those acts necessary for the successful pursuit of life.”<sup>6</sup> The introduction goes on to explain that when a person loses the ability to perform the functions deemed essential to a full life, he or she (the document specifies “he”) becomes disabled.<sup>7</sup> The idea that having a disability not only renders one inherently “abnormal,” but, in so doing, forecloses possibilities for the “successful pursuit of life” would come to be vigorously challenged by an emergent disability rights movement intent on re-presenting disability to the American public—not as an impairment to be corrected—but as a set of social, cultural, and political conditions that systematically excluded, devalued, and frequently eradicated people with disabilities. Debates within the movement about how to represent and re-present disability for public audiences would call into question notions of normality and abnormality and, over time, work to expose how concepts of the “normal” worked to deny disabled people access to public spaces, housing, health care, and employment as well as to those social norms and institutions seen as “necessary for the successful pursuit of life” such as marriage, heterosexual reproduction, and economic self-sufficiency.

By the time the Smithsonian’s next exhibition on the history of disability debuted in the summer of 2000, items from the museum’s considerable collection of rehabilitative devices were conspicuously absent. In their place were artifacts, images, and narratives which suggested the ways in which the medical model of disability as something to be contained, corrected, and managed contributed to the systematic regulation, erasure, and

elimination of those with disabilities. In this section, I examine some of those artifacts, images, and narratives. I show how these objects, photos, and life stories evince a history that casts the disabled as disposable while also revealing instances of resistance to that disposability. For people with disabilities, resisting disposability would also entail furthering claims to equality, citizenship, and inclusion. In the next section, I ponder the limits and complexities of those claims before concluding the chapter with a consideration of what a queer and disability politics explicitly opposed the normative terms of inclusion might do. For now, I want to consider the political and cultural work done by rendering histories of violence towards the disabled visible to public audiences.

The 2000 Disability Rights Movement exhibition featured a set of handmade keys fashioned by, and confiscated from, patients at the Winnebago, Wisconsin Mental Health Institute with the caption “Resistance takes many forms. Isolated individuals seeking a measure of control are also a part of the rights movement.”<sup>8</sup> The caption goes on to describe how the “involuntary confinement, forced treatment, and poor living conditions” often found within institutions for those with developmental and psychiatric disabilities helped to forge a movement for de-institutionalization and independent living for those with disabilities.<sup>9</sup> Another section of the exhibit titled “The Right to Dissent” includes a photograph of a man lying on a sidewalk. A wheelchair can be seen behind him. He lifts his head from the pavement to look into the camera. A handmade sign spread across his lower body reads “Nursing Homes Kill!”<sup>10</sup> Still another portion of the exhibit entitled “Missing Names, Stolen Lives” elaborates on the de-humanization that disabled people have historically faced through the story of Bertha Flaten. Institutionalized at the Faribault State School and Hospital in Minnesota because she had epilepsy, Flaten is shown in her admission photograph with a

caption explaining “For many people with a disability, the greatest struggle is to have others accept them as human.”<sup>11</sup> Next, visitors encounter Flaten’s gravestone marked only with the number 7. Like thousands of others who died in institutions throughout the United States, Flaten’s grave was not marked with a name. A short video clip depicts the elderly mother of another Faribault resident placing a proper gravestone with her daughter’s name on the former grounds of the institution. A caption explains that activists and former patients have been working to replace anonymous markers with headstones that identify the dead.<sup>12</sup>

The 2013 digital exhibition *Everybody: An Artifact History of Disability in America* features similar stories and images, including an anonymous marker from a racially segregated facility in Milledgeville, Georgia bearing the number 72. A caption relates that, for minimal record keeping, gravestone numbers were used twice, once for African-American patients and once for white patients. The number 72 marked the grave of either Nathaniel Cowart (white) or Sarah Savage (African-American), both of whom died in 1882.<sup>13</sup> The *Everybody* exhibit also features a set of lobotomy knives used to treat “unruly or depressed patients” by destroying the prefrontal lobe of the brain by inserting the knives behind the eye, a straight-jacket used to restrain psychiatric patients, thiorazine suppositories, a machine used for electro-convulsive therapy, and a set of calipers used to measure skulls to determine intelligence.<sup>14</sup> Visitors to these exhibitions also encounter a range of other artifacts that attest to resistance to regulation and containment by disabled people. In addition to the hand-made keys referenced earlier, there is a set of handcuffs cut by police from a disabled protestor which visitors to 2000 exhibition were invited to touch. There are t-shirts with such slogans as “Not Dead Yet,” a button that proclaims “Shock is Elder Abuse,” and a

bumper sticker that appropriates Nancy Reagan's famous phrase to urge "Just Say No to Ritalin."<sup>15</sup>

How are we to make sense of the stories these objects and images tell? What do they reveal about how American society has dealt with physical, cognitive, and sensory difference? How do these objects relate to larger socio-economic, cultural, and political structures that shape and define who, and who is not, part of American society? Curators of both the Disability Rights Movement and Everybody exhibitions categorize these artifacts for audiences under terms like "Identity," "Community," and "Autonomy." My reading of these artifacts complicates each of these headings by showing that their meanings are not as self-evident as is frequently assumed. "Identity," for instance, is shown to be denied to those with disabilities who are identified and defined by the state as disposable non-persons.

"Community" is depicted as both a profoundly normalizing and exclusionary force that places those disabilities outside the bounds of "normal" American communities and compels them to forge their own communities within institutions amid efforts to normalize them to the standards of the dominant community that locked them away. "Autonomy" is depicted, not as a given of liberal individualism, but as something at once denied to disabled people through notions of liberal individualism that presume able-bodiedness as prerequisite to autonomy, and pursued by the disabled through resistance to able-bodied norms.

The "Everybody" exhibition begins its exploration of many of these objects and images with a look "outside" the institutions, hospitals, schools, and psychiatric facilities that, from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century forward have housed and cared for people with a wide range of physical, cognitive, and sensory disabilities. A series of postcards featuring stately buildings on carefully manicured estates greets visitors. A caption explains:



Social expectations about citizenship, health, and disability motivated 19th-century reformers and politicians to create asylums, hospitals, and residential schools. The buildings were often a point of pride for local communities and a tourist site, worthy of postcard recognition. The postcards also served as positive public relations, such as this one from the Western Pennsylvania School for the Blind in which sweet children and attentive teachers play games. The existence of so many postcards from so many places indicates the extent to which people accepted institutions as mundane and uncontroversial.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that “social expectations about citizenship, health, and disability” governed who was housed in these institutions signals to audiences that not just anybody was compelled to live in these places. Rather, those deemed outside the boundaries of able-bodied health and citizenship were the ones relegated to these facilities.

That these sites functioned both as a point of pride and source of revenue for local communities as well as a means of “positive public relations” premised on the presentation of normative bodies (sweet children and attentive teachers) serves to underscore the boundaries of “inside” and “outside” that forged dominant conceptions of “community” and “identity.” Residents of the community surrounding these facilities took pride in managing those seen as unassimilable to their community and identified themselves accordingly as those within the community while also reaping the economic benefits that accrue from “warehousing” otherwise unprofitable persons. As visitors proceed through this section they find a sign on a suburban street indicating “No Wheelchairs Beyond This Point” with a narrative caption that explains how “removal” of difference from American society has long been seen as indispensable to the growth and development of a nation premised on industrial growth and development and the policing of differences that might thwart, complicate, or call into question that development. The text elaborates:

In the Early Republic, the new American government organized ways to address differences among the population. Regulations on commerce, property, and other

affairs were revised to support a rapidly expanding economy. Some Americans also concluded that those who were different, vulnerable, or less powerful should not have certain legal protections. Hospitals had set aside wards for people with mental illness since the mid-18th century. The infamous removal of Cherokee, Seminole, and other Indians in the Southeast in the early 1800s further demonstrated cultural agreement on how to deal with differences. Removal of people with disabilities from their original communities started then as well.<sup>17</sup>

References to capitalist expansion and Indian removal serve to subtly but powerfully remind audiences that the development of U.S. economic and social structures went hand-in-hand with the strategic and systematic destruction of pre-capitalist social and economic arrangements. In addition, as numerous scholars working within and across the fields American Studies, Native Studies, and Queer Postcolonial Studies such as Mark Rifkin, Albert Hurtado, and Andrea Smith have shown, establishing capitalism and white supremacy as the “natural order of things” entailed not only dispossessing Native people of their lives, land, and natural resources but also establishing and policing racialized boundaries of sex and gender that established the white, patriarchal, heterosexual family as an economic and social unit indispensable to American capitalism and the flourishing of a U.S. nation-state premised on the erasure of practices and norms that might threaten or call into question this order.<sup>18</sup>

Seen from a disability perspective, the project of U.S. settler-colonialism can also be understood to entail the containment, correction, and regulation of those bodies deemed incompatible with able-bodied, capitalist notions of individual autonomy and economic productivity. The Everybody exhibition goes on to note, for instance, that “community” was often forged in institutions through shared experiences of learning a trade, language, gaining an education or developing life-long friendships. Crucially however, the exhibition also suggests that language, education, and trade skills were also animated by the project of normalizing difference. A photo of the New Mexico School for the Deaf in this section, for

example, depicts Anglo, Mexican, and Native students pledging allegiance to the flag. The section's introduction notes that attempts by residents to build community within institutions were also marked by "forced treatment, punishment, sub-standard care, and abuse."<sup>19</sup> The discerning viewer cannot escape envisioning New Mexico's own history of colonization and violent assimilation to the U.S. nation-state, particularly given the curatorial framing of this section which places institutionalization of persons with disabilities within the context of the larger project of U.S. settler colonialism.

Once "inside" these institutions, visitors begin to encounter the objects and images of restraint, control, regulation, and erasure referenced earlier. At this point, we can begin to discern how items such as hand-made keys, straight-jackets, and lobotomy knives signify what Henry Giroux terms "the punishing society." According to Giroux, the punishing and policing of differences has been central the historical emergence and maintenance of contemporary neoliberalism. Those persons regarded as "dangerous and unfit for integration into American society," including the mentally, physically, psychiatrically disabled, are ushered into an increasing number of for profit prisons and institutions for the warehousing of populations otherwise seen as redundant and disposable under neoliberal capitalism.<sup>20</sup>

Writing in the Journal *Social Identities*, Giroux builds on the work of Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman to articulate a "neoliberal biopolitics of disposability." According to Giroux:

Under neoliberalism's rationality and its pedagogical practices, not only are the state and the public sector reduced to the phantom of market choices, but the citizen-subjects of such an order navigate the relationship between themselves and others around the calculating logics of competition, individual risks, self-interest, and a winner-take-all survivalist ethic reminiscent of the social Darwinian script played out daily on 'reality television.' Moreover, the survivalist-ethic of 19<sup>th</sup> century social Darwinism has been invoked to reinforce notions of racial hierarchy and the current

neo-liberal agenda has systematically sought to recreate racial segregation and exclusion through the re-structuring of income policies.<sup>21</sup>

Giroux's analysis thus connects 19<sup>th</sup>-century practices and ideologies of racial subordination and exclusion to present day modes of regulation that delineate "fit" autonomous bodies and "citizen-subjects" from those understood as unfit, unworthy, and thus subject to regulation, economic exploitation, and disposability. As Giroux explains, "Neoliberalism also connects power and knowledge to the technologies, strategies, tactics, and pedagogical practices key to the management and ordering of populations and to controlling consent."<sup>22</sup>

From a queer disability studies perspective, the "biopolitics of disposability" described by Giroux is not only profoundly racialized, but also, of course, able-bodied and heteronormative. Indeed, as queer theorists such as Michael Warner, Cathy Cohen, and David Eng have revealed, heteronormativity entails not only compulsory heterosexuality and the enforcement of strident male/female binaries as the norm around which society is structured, but also maintaining the supremacy of white norms, standards, and expectations of family, desire, and success. In this way, heteronormativity displaces all of those persons and populations who fail to live up to a normative social order founded on white supremacy, monogamous marriage, the heterosexual family, and processes of economic production and consumption premised on able-bodiedness and individual autonomy including correcting, containing, disabilities for profit and the economic benefit of able-bodied outside of institutions.<sup>23</sup>

Because people with disabilities (especially those consigned to institutions) have largely been regarded as sexually deviant (that is, either asexual or a sexual menace to able-bodied reproductive futurity) undesirable, and presumably unable to work, marry, or raise

children, they frequently do not meet heteronormative terms and have historically been denied full access to marriage and parental rights as well access to housing and employment. As historian and theorist of disability Paul K. Longmore has argued, the inability of people with disabilities to meet social norms and expectations have meant that they have been—and continue to be—frequently regarded as having “lives not worth living.”<sup>24</sup>

This has had disastrous consequences for the disabled, especially those residing in institutions and hospitals. Longmore’s work on the disability rights movement’s opposition to physician-assisted suicide, for instance, documents how neoliberal economic structures compel persons with disabilities to live under often unbearable conditions in institutional settings where they are denied the chance to lead full and independent lives and deprived of the economic resources needed to do so. The depression and suicidal ideations experienced by disabled people under these conditions are then construed by able-bodied physicians, the courts, and the media as the “logical,” “rational,” and “natural” consequences of a person’s disabled status. Rather than being offered psychiatric care or being allowed access to the resources required to live independently, these patients are sometimes euthanized.

In Michigan for instance, paraplegic David Rivlin received less than three hundred dollars a month from Medicaid, while the state provided nearly \$300 dollars a day to the nursing home that housed him.<sup>25</sup> In 1989, Rivlin successfully petitioned a Michigan court to end his life with assistance from his physician. Disability activists immediately pointed out that had Rivlin been offered support for education and assisted-living and in home support services he might well have achieved a quality of life that would’ve made suicide a far less desirable option. As Paul Longmore pointed out:

The truth was that David Rivlin might have enjoyed the life he yearned for, but society blocked his efforts, and government policies forced him in a nursing home. Far more than his physical condition, the system created by public policies robbed him of real choices, and in the end, made his life unbearable.<sup>26</sup>

Media coverage of the Rivlin case consistently emphasized the loss of Rivlin's able-bodied status and his inability to lead the "normal" life he had once enjoyed. Media accounts positioned the loss of his athletic abilities and of a long-term girlfriend as the consequences of his tragic disability rather than result of cultural perceptions which deem heterosexuality and physical ability as the benchmarks of a worthwhile life. The able-bodied presumption that disability is a fate worse than death thus conspired to occlude the structural and economic forces that corroded Rivlin's quality of life and ultimately lead to his death.<sup>27</sup> This is the biopolitics of disposability in action since Rivlin's life is literally regarded as disposable.

One of the artifacts included in both the "Everybody" and "Disability Rights Movement" exhibits is a pin created by the group "Not Dead Yet." It features the alphanumeric T4 encircled by the phrase "Never Again." T4 represents Tiergarten 4, the group of Nazi physicians charged with killing more than 100,000 people with disabilities.<sup>28</sup> Not Dead Yet defines itself as the "Resistance" not just because of its opposition to physician-assisted suicide, but because of its concomitant effort to provide assisted living and access to affordable health care to those with disabilities. Not Dead Yet's founder, disability rights attorney Diane Coleman, thus insists on the group's webpage that "It is the ultimate form of discrimination to offer people with disabilities help to die without first having provided options to live."<sup>29</sup> In this way, Not Dead Yet re-framed physician-assisted suicide from a "Right-to-Life" debate by moving away from social conservative discourses of morality and

the “sanctity of life” and towards a disability consciousness which identified the issue not as a quasi-religious one, but one of social justice, equity, and access to the resources needed to sustain one’s life. As Donna Redpord, a disabled activist from Arizona wrote in a letter to Dr. Jack Kevorkian: "Put your energy into advocating for the Americans with Disabilities Act, fair housing, and home- and community-based services like attendant care. Then your "clients" wouldn't think that death is their only option."<sup>30</sup>

The analysis of Longmore and the work of Not Dead Yet brings context to the emblems of disposability and dehumanization found in the Everybody and Disability Rights Movement exhibitions and gives truth to proclamations such as “Nursing Homes Kill!” In so doing, the objects demonstrate to visitors how artifacts from the past connect to the contemporary concerns and neoliberal relations of power described Giroux and Longmore. These objects also gesture towards the ways in which the disability rights movement has worked to resist the normative, able-bodied, and often deadly terms of inclusion in American society. Tellingly, for example, Not Dead Yet’s “Resistance” logo is juxtaposed on its website with an image of a eugenics certificate that, at once, reminds the broader public of the history that linked public policy on disability to eugenicist logics of bodily perfection and, notably in this image, to heterosexual companionate marriage. A section on eugenics in the Everybody exhibition elaborates on these dynamics and further illustrates how issues of race, sex, and disability, have historically intersected to forge “disposable” bodies in American society.

Visitors to this portion of the exhibit first confront a “fitter families” medal from the 1920s. Fitter families contests were common at county fairs throughout the 1920s. Entrants to these contest provided information about their families, answered intelligence questions,

and displayed their offspring.<sup>31</sup> The bronze medal featured in the exhibit depicts a presumably white, heterosexual couple and their young child holding a torch surrounded by the inscription “Yea Have a Goodley Heritage.”<sup>32</sup> The back of the medal indicates that it was awarded to a family by the American Eugenics Society. The caption accompanying the medal explains to viewers “Although citizenship provides certain rights, access to them has been unequal.” The caption continues:

For example, some citizens have been sterilized, warehoused, euthanized, and imprisoned because their voices, brains, and bodies were not acceptable to their communities. With the popularity of social Darwinism and the ideas of Herbert Spencer—the doctrine of “survival of the fittest”—in the late 19th century, acceptance of people with disabilities diminished. Respect for and aid to people with disabilities and the poor eroded. At the same time, many people believed that criminal and other behaviors or traits, such as addiction and homosexuality, were inherited. Eugenicists justified eliminating the “unfit” by citing the betterment of society.<sup>33</sup>

This caption echoes Giroux’s earlier assessment of the historical development of a “neoliberal biopolitics of disposability” rooted in hyper-capitalist, social Darwinian dynamics of competition, battles for resources, and “survival of the fittest.” The caption also again calls our attention to the heterosexual and able-bodied assumptions that animate notions of “fitness” and social betterment. “Homosexuals” are included here along with addicts as among those targeted for elimination from society.

In addition to the British Herbert Spencer, the exhibition lists a host of other highly influential liberal and progressive leaders and intellectuals in the United States as early proponents of eugenics. These include American “scientists, politicians, and feminists” such as Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Woodrow Wilson, and Victoria Woodhull.<sup>34</sup> Curators thus signal to the discerning visitor how disability itself was seen as antithetical to liberal democratic and “progressive” visions of a better society. Indeed, eugenics construed



those with disabilities (along with homosexuals, addicts, the racially impure, and other undesirables) as entirely outside the bounds of social citizenship and rights protection. Advocating for white, able-bodied labor rights and white women's rights was thus viewed by many progressives as of-a-piece with the eugenicist vision of erasing undesirables from the "more perfect union" they envisioned. As the exhibition baldly states: "The idea of creating 'better citizens' is called eugenics."<sup>35</sup>

As these images, objects, and narratives suggests, the eugenicist campaign to eliminate defective bodies was a deeply heteronormative international project concerned with both race and sexuality. Sterilization laws were a major legacy of the movement and became a key technology of violence used to maintain white, able-bodied supremacy. By the 1970s at least 60,000 people in the United States had been forcibly sterilized under 33 state laws.<sup>36</sup> A photograph in the eugenics section of Junius Wilson, a deaf African-American man who was falsely accused of rape, incorrectly judged as mentally incompetent, and then castrated and institutionalized by the State of North Carolina for more than 60 years powerfully demonstrates the decisive interconnections between eugenics and race, sex, and disability. Wilson's racial status foregrounds his prosecution for rape as well as his subsequent castration and incarceration in the segregated south. In this way, the image specifies how the forces of compulsory heterosexuality, white supremacy, and racism worked with notions of able-bodiedness and "mental competency" to construe Junius Wilson as a social and sexual menace to be contained by eugenics movement laws permitting forced sterilization in the name of civic order and public health.<sup>37</sup>

The material artifacts and visual renderings I've explored so far in this chapter consistently iterate histories of devaluing and regulating disability and those with disabilities

while defining them as “outside” of American communities, possessing, according to the state, a less than human identity and seen as unfit for an autonomous life. In addition, I have shown how these artifacts were linked to heteronormative and able-bodied notions of what counts as a “life worth living” as well as who counts a citizen and who, therefore, is entitled to the provisions and conditions necessary for living. I have also spotlighted efforts by disability rights activist to challenge the disposability of disabled people. But while artifacts such as the keys fashioned by patients at a Wisconsin mental health facility and the buttons, bumper stickers, and t-shirts from groups such as Not Dead Yet certainly convey resistance to disposability and confinement by people with disabilities, defying the heteronormative terms of inclusion in American society that animate that confinement and disposability has proven a difficult, complex, and on-going challenge for those with disabilities.

Newspaper clippings and flyers featured in a section of the 2000 exhibition entitled “The Struggle for Self Definition and Autonomy” illustrate this fact. One article features a female beauty contestant in a bathing suit who is cheered for having advanced to the position of runner-up despite using a hearing aid. She is smiling and radiant as she looks into the camera.<sup>38</sup> Accompanying media suggest to audiences both the ways in which media and cultural depictions of people with disabilities have consistently and condescendingly rendered the everyday achievements of those with disabilities as proof of their normalcy (Universal Design pioneer Ron Mace is featured in an article that hails him as courageous for winning a model airplane contest as a young boy with polio) and how people with disabilities are depicted as aberrant threats to the community. A community flyer featured in the same section for instance warns “Keep Your Neighborhood Safe. Keep Your Neighborhood Peaceful. Keep Your Neighborhood Healthy. Keep the Mentally Retarded Away From City

Streets. Keep the Mentally Retarded Away from Your Children. Keep the Mentally Retarded Away from your Home.”<sup>39</sup>

While this flyer presents the developmentally disabled as a threat to safety, peace, health, and children (fears also historically ascribed to gay men and lesbians) the beauty contestant photo constitutes a form of patronizing normalization that upholds heteronormative and able-bodied standards of feminine beauty as the standard to which all disabled woman should aspire. Dominant heteropatriarchal notions of sex, gender, and ability thus structure the production and reception of these images of disability. Failure to adhere to able-bodied notions of cognitive ability are presented as a threat to families, children, and communities while assimilation to normative standards of beauty is championed as the apex of success for disabled women.

These images and narratives thus permit audiences to ponder how heterosexual and able-bodied notions of sex and gender circumscribe our perceptions of disability and achievement and—just as important—how processes of self-definition and struggles for autonomy and inclusion cannot be easily disaggregated from structures of able-bodiedness and heteronormativity that work to constrain and shape both individual and collective acts of self-definition. In the next section of this chapter, I consider images and artifacts concerning civil rights and disability rights in these exhibitions. I explore what it means for people with disabilities to pursue rights, equality, and inclusion in a society that fixes them as either inherently abnormal and unequal or as equal only to the extent that they can achieve able-bodied norms. My reading of these items and narratives shows, therefore, how struggles for disability rights and inclusion are also struggles over the terms of receiving rights and inclusion in the United States. I then conclude the chapter with a consideration of how these

exhibitions help us envision a queer disability politics premised on rejecting normativity as a prerequisite for social inclusion and equality.

### **“Equal Rights Are Not Special Rights”**

The Smithsonian’s 2013 digital exhibition “Everybody: An Artifact History of Disability in America,” features a section entitled “Civil Rights, Disability Rights.” Among other things, the section includes a photograph of a 1963 civil rights protest in Birmingham, Alabama in which a blind African-American singer is placed under arrest, an image of activists in wheelchairs surrounding a statue of Martin Luther King, Jr., and disabled protestors blocking public transit buses in New Jersey with one sign in the center of the frame that reads “I can’t even get to the back of the bus.” Front and center amid these images of black civil rights and disability rights struggles is a poem by disability rights activist and writer Laura Hersey. An audio clip features Hersey reading the poem aloud. A caption accompanying the written text of the poem explains to viewers that Hersey’s words capture “...the motivation behind the work done by disability rights activists.”<sup>40</sup> Entitled “You Get Proud by Practicing,” the poem’s second stanza states:

You do not need/A better body, a purer spirit, or a Ph.D. to be proud. You do not need/A lot of money, a handsome boyfriend, or a nice car. You do not need/To be able to see, or walk, or hear, or use big complicated words, or do any of the things you just can’t do to be proud./A caseworker cannot make you proud, or a doctor./You only need more practice./You get proud by practicing.<sup>41</sup>

The poem’s implicit critique of heteronormative capitalism (“you do not need a lot of money, a handsome boyfriend, or a nice car”) combines with its exposure of the normalizing functions of the medical model of disability (“you do not need to see, walk, or hear...a caseworker cannot make you proud, or a doctor.”) to set the stage for a reading of civil rights and disability rights premised not solely on celebratory historical narratives of achieving

rights for disabled people but also on challenging the normative terms of inclusion in American society on which the extension of rights hinges.

Thus, while this section's introduction notes the influence of the black civil rights movement on subsequent struggles for women's rights, gay rights, and disability rights, visitors to the exhibition are also alerted to the fact that "the rights of citizenship" have not been extended equally, even when pursued (and ostensibly obtained) by myriad disenfranchised groups. "And because disability cuts across race, class, and gender," explains the introduction, "and people come to it in many different ways, affiliations and expectations also varied."<sup>42</sup> Explicitly framing disability rights as a question of citizenship, civil rights and disability rights are understood here as highly contingent and localized rather than universal. While American democracy has long proffered the rhetoric of equal rights to citizens, the exhibition suggests, notions of who counts as a "citizen" have varied and been contested throughout U.S. history so that equal rights are neither inherent in American society nor, in practical terms, guaranteed by it.

Queer theorist Amy L. Brandzel contends that citizenship is both a powerful beacon for disenfranchised groups seeking greater justice and equality and is "necessarily, exclusive, privileged, and normative."<sup>43</sup> According to Brandzel, citizenship thus functions as a "double discourse" that "serves as a source of political organizing and national belonging and as a claim to equality, on the one hand, while it erases and denies its own exclusionary and differentiating nature, on the other." "It is this doubled character of citizenship," Brandzel insists, "that most recommends a healthy skepticism towards calls for citizenship, especially those couched in terms of universality and inclusion."<sup>44</sup> The "Everybody" exhibit's framing of civil rights and disability rights invites much of the skepticism that Brandzel incisively

champions, revealing how citizenship is also a profoundly able-bodied and heteronormative construct that polices disability in myriad and interlocking ways. Drawing on the insights of M. Jacqui Alexander, Brandzel argues that citizenship is predicated fundamentally on heteronormativity. As Brandzel explains:

Heteronormativity promotes the norm of social life not only as heterosexual but also as married, monogamous, white, and upper middle class. In other words, heteronormativity promotes the idea that middle-class white heterosexuals are synonymous with “Americans.” Racial and class norms are central to heteronormativity. Consumption is as well. Good, normal Americans participate in the consumerist American ethos whereby homeownership and purchasing power are equivalent to the American dream.<sup>45</sup>

Heteronormativity, then, allows us to place the poet Laura Hersey’s notion of disability pride—and the civil rights narratives with which it is counter-posed—in a queer light. In so doing, we can once again see how people with disabilities are consistently held to heteronormative standards—the severity of one’s disability is frequently measured by how well a one is able to meet able-bodied standards including whether one is, or is likely to get married, get a job, or gain economic self-sufficiency—and notice the ways in which Hersey and the “Everybody” exhibit posit a disability rights politics premised on resistance to heteronormativity.

Hersey’s poem goes on to narrate the challenges of pursuing justice and finding a sense of self in a heteronormative and able-bodied society that denies both justice and autonomy to people with disabilities. Hersey states:

You can add your voice all night to the voices of one hundred and fifty others in a circle around a jailhouse where your brothers and sisters are being held for blocking buses with no lifts, or you can be one of the ones inside the jailhouse knowing of the circle outside. You can speak your love to a friend without fear. You can find someone who will listen to you without judging you or doubting you or being afraid of you and let you hear yourself perhaps for the first time.<sup>46</sup>

Hersey's words not only evoke images of political struggle and solidarity ("jailhouses," "brothers and sisters," the denial of public access) but also relate struggle and solidarity in terms of resistance to the social norms and expectations placed upon those with disabilities. That able-bodied society denies a voice to, judges, doubts, and fears disabled people is made clear. As is the fact that people with disabilities cannot usually "speak love" even to a friend. In a heteropatriarchal culture and society where love is typically construed in terms of heterosexual courtship, companionate marriage, and the nuclear family, other forms of love and ways of loving, including friendship, are either devalued, relegated to a lower status, or rendered altogether unimaginable. Hence, for Hersey, the struggle is not only, or even primarily, one of access, rights, and integration. The struggle, rather, is one of self-affirming defiance to an able-bodied normative social order. Refusal to reconcile one's self to that order is thus positioned as the prerequisite to changing it and to achieving a sense of pride and self-worth denied by society.

Thus, Hersey suggests, disability does not produce the inability to board a bus. Instead, a lack of lifts that presumes able-bodied normativity produces disability. These same normative assumptions work to deny "love" and "voice" to disabled people on the false premise that their disabilities necessarily foreclose both. In this way, Hersey's poem demonstrates how disability movement struggles for civil rights and public access were not actually about "architectural barriers" or even about "attitudinal" or perceptual barriers. Rather, these struggles were, are, and remain, struggles over changing the conditions of possibility for disabled people by exposing and challenging the able-bodied and heteronormative assumptions that underlie both architectural and "attitudinal" barriers. This is why, as Brandzel reveals in her study of same-sex marriage, appeals for rights and access

through citizenship ultimately fail. It is not just that citizenship is fundamentally exclusive and normative.

It is also that gaining access to the rights, privileges, and protections of citizenship not only does not guarantee fundamental transformation of the conditions of oppression for marginalized groups, but that it may in fact reify and reproduce its effects. This is because the allocation of rights by the state will not only serve to occlude the inevitable denial of those rights to those unable or “unfit” to receive them, but also because rights, in and of themselves, as Hersey’s poem suggests, cannot alter the underlying “common sense” notions, assumptions, biases, and structures that sustain systematic discrimination, inequality, and marginalization in the first place. Indeed, the securing of rights for some can exacerbate the problem of inequality for others by forwarding a narrative of progress that says rights and access have been won when in fact the underlying conditions of oppression remain unchallenged.

Furthermore, and crucially, this narrative of progress for disabled people through rights and inclusion not only exacerbates and occludes on-going inequalities disabled people—as well as structures that support those inequalities—but, in so doing, has clear implications for how we understand, and present, the history of disability in the United States. This is because presenting the history of disability in the United States as a normalizing story of people with disabilities gaining rights, citizenship, and enclosure in American society at once erases how lack of access to citizenship and economic resources continues to be denied to people with disabilities, and also, aligns disability history with “citizenship” in ways that risks reifying the subject at the center of U.S. disability as a white, heteronormative citizen-subject.<sup>47</sup> By focusing visitors not just on rights and citizenship but



also on historical and on-going processes of exclusion, curators of the Everybody and Disability Rights exhibitions made decisions that helped to mitigate the trap of normative citizenship in public history.

I, in turn, offer a crip/queer reading of these exhibitions that demonstrates the importance of focusing on the non-normative “citizen” and on the queer subject(s) of disability history in order to expose, and call into question, the normalizing and exclusionary work done by—in a word—“straight” histories of disability that uncritically accept and celebrate a teleological narrative of rights and inclusion for people with disabilities *without* attending to the ways in which citizenship, rights, and inclusion remain attainable only for those with disabilities most able to meet the white heteronormative standards. In order to understand how these exhibitions help to further the queer visualities of disability history I uncover and champion, it is helpful to reflect back on how and why these exhibits first came about and what choices were made by curators early on about how to present, or not present, the disability rights movement.

The same year that the National Organization on Disability began its campaign to influence the design of the FDR Memorial in order to explicitly depict Roosevelt’s wheelchair use, a security guard at the Castle, the Smithsonian Institution’s administrative building, phoned the National Museum of American History to say that someone had left a worn-out wheelchair with a note attached stating that it was to be donated to the museum’s collection. The wheelchair belonged to Ed Roberts, a founder and deeply respected member of the disability rights movement from the mid-1960s until his death in March of 1995. It had been left at the Castle by a friend in May of 1995. Fashioned to his specifications, Roberts’ wheelchair featured a blue automobile seat, go-cart rear wheels, a large headlight, chain-

drive, reclining back and joy stick controls, a hand-made right arm cradle, and a bumper sticker with “Yes!” on it.

More than a medical device or historical artifact, Ed Roberts’ wheelchair came to be viewed by curators as a powerful symbol of the struggle of disabled people to achieve equal rights and citizenship in the United States. Emblematic of public access, activism, and social integration, the wheelchair expressed a civil rights history of disability in material form. Stories of how the wheelchair came to the Smithsonian, including accounts of Roberts’ life and career, stressed this symbolism. For instance, before being deposited at the Castle, disability rights activist planned a march in tribute to Roberts’ life at the U.S. Capitol. The march was to feature Roberts’ empty wheelchair and would draw attention to activists concerns over on-going efforts to roll-back the Americans with Disabilities Act. A poster and press release for the planned rally by the group Wheels for Justice featured an image of the Statue of Liberty in a wheelchair.<sup>48</sup>

Ed Roberts’ public career on behalf of disability rights began in 1962. As Cheryl Marie Wade and other disability activists and scholars have observed, this was the same year that James Meredith became the first African-American admitted to the segregated University of Mississippi. Roberts applied for, and was initially denied, admission to the University of California at Berkeley. A high school administrator had previously threatened to withhold Roberts’ diploma because he had not completed the physical education and driver’s education courses required to graduate high school. Although a dean at UC Berkeley told him at the time, “We’ve tried cripples before and it didn’t work,” Roberts persisted and was eventually admitted to Berkeley as an “experiment.” A local newspaper ran the headline “A Hopeless Cripple Goes to School.”<sup>49</sup> Roberts lived in the hospital on campus

since it was the only building that could accommodate his iron lung and wheelchair. He went on to found the first independent living center in the United States and would eventually head the California Department of Rehabilitative Services, the same agency that had once denied him funding for college on the basis that he was too disabled to be rehabilitated or made viable for the job market. He was the recipient of McArthur “genius” award, the first ever awarded to a person with a disability. An account of Roberts’ life published in the Chronicle of Higher Education as part of piece heralding the Smithsonian’s plans to exhibit his wheelchair, noted further (as if to assure audiences of his achievements and stature) that Roberts also got married and had a son.<sup>50</sup>

Ed Roberts’ compelling story of upward mobility and successful struggle to integrate into an American society intolerant of, and unaccommodating to, physical, cognitive, and sensory differences thus became a catalyst for launching a first of its kind exhibition on the history of disability in the United States. As curators considered what to do with the chair, they came to learn not only what a venerated figure was among disabled people, but also how little they and other museums had done to illuminate the social, political, and cultural history of people with disability in the United States.<sup>51</sup> Four years to the day that Roberts’ wheelchair was left at the Smithsonian, curators convened a conference at the National Museum of American History. Entitled “Disability and Practice of Public History,” the gathering brought together leading scholars in history and disability studies to discuss how to create and display content on the social, cultural, and political aspects of disability. The Disability Rights Movement exhibition grew out of that conference and was the first exhibit on the National Mall designed to be fully accessible to all visitors regardless of their ability. In addition, the exhibit would be the first ever to explore the cultural and political history of

disability in the United States from the perspectives of those with disabilities. Its content would focus, not on the medical aspects of disability, but on its profoundly social dimensions. The Smithsonian heralded its newest exhibition as “a quiet revolution...that may soon spread to museums across the country.”<sup>52</sup>

Despite its role in sparking thought and debate at the Smithsonian about disability and public history, Ed Roberts’ spectacular wheelchair would not be featured in the Disability Rights Movement exhibition. Curators made the strategic decision not only to exclude medical devices from the exhibit, but also avoid featuring prominent leaders of the movement. Principal curator Katherine Ott sought to present the disability rights movement to audiences as a grassroots struggle to transform American society. In so doing, Ott and her team deliberately eschewed both medicalizing disability and advancing narratives of a movement powered by exceptional individuals.<sup>53</sup>

Ed Roberts’ wheelchair tells a powerful story of individual resistance, adaptation, and substantial contribution to social justice and social change for those with disabilities. Now featured in the “Everybody” exhibition’s “Transportation” and “About this Exhibition” sections, its hand-made quality and imaginative character suggest a visionary sense of self animated by difference. At the same time, the wheelchair can be seen as a mode of social mobility made possible by Roberts’ access to education as well as his racial, class, and gender privilege. Roberts’ experience of disability, as well as his capacity to creatively transform that experience into changes for disabled people, was shaped by his social positionality. To say this is not to denigrate Ed Roberts’ considerable contributions toward greater freedom and justice for disabled people. It is, rather, to suggest that there is more to

the history of disability rights, and more to achieving justice, than individual (or even collective) struggles for integration might suggest.

It is also to underscore again that transforming the conditions of possibility for disabled people means also challenging the very terms upon which those conditions are based. From this perspective, one could read the home-made, scrappy, quality of Ed Roberts' chair as iterating an anti-consumerist history of disability wherein people with disabilities have frequently adapted consumer products designed by able-bodied people for use in an able-bodied world. Until the early 1980s, for example, wheelchairs were designed by able-bodied engineers for use in institutional settings such as hospitals. Their heavy, bulky, and uncomfortable designs presumed an inactive life of enclosure, rest, and utter dependency on others.<sup>54</sup> Ed Roberts chair can be seen to radically defy these norms and presumptions. Nonetheless, however, the strategic absence of Roberts chair in the Disability Rights Movement exhibition is useful for pushing audiences beyond metanarratives of great leaders who overcome. A lack of focus on singular leaders thus allows us to consideration of how struggles for civil rights and integration signaled a larger history of exclusion and eradication resisted through grassroots and diffuse, rather than tightly organized, actions. The presence of the wheelchair, and the embodiment attached it, might well have helped to obscure this history in favor of more familiar heteronormative histories of triumphant political and social success that ignore persistent injustice.

Instead, the Disability Rights Movement exhibition shows how ordinary folks, including activists, designers, parents, and patients, all play a role in on-going efforts to secure greater justice and equity for people with disabilities. In this way, the Disability Rights Movement exhibit de-centers the white, male, heterosexual subject of disability

history as well the grand narratives of triumphant, and “unified” struggle that naturalize that heteronormative citizen-subject. This permits us to understand how resistance to normativity and power occurs in multiple places across multiple vectors of society and culture. As we shall see, this desire to not over simply the history of the disability rights movement as a white normative struggle also structured curators’ choices around the appropriation of civil rights discourses.

The exhibition’s opening in July 2000 was timed to coincide with the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Anniversaries are common and practical way for public historians to garner attention for an exhibit.<sup>55</sup> The launch of the Disability Rights Movement exhibition coincided with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1960 desegregation of a W.F. Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina following six months of sit-ins waged by African-American students and civil rights organizations. Located next to an exhibit of the Smithsonian’s portion of that Woolworth’s lunch counter, the exhibition strategically drew upon the symbolism of the black civil rights movement. Lead curator Katherine Ott viewed the familiar civil rights paradigm as a powerful starting point from which audiences could begin to reconceive of disability as not simply a medical designation, but a social and political construct that had excluded millions with disabilities from full participation in American life.<sup>56</sup>

The civil rights images and symbols that curators drew upon to frame the nation’s first disability rights exhibition represented more than a metaphorical hook to capture and reel in audiences. Many of those directly involved in the disability rights movement had been profoundly shaped and inspired by the African-American civil rights struggle. They found therein a powerful model for challenging the exclusion of disabled people from public spaces

and public life in the United States. Key figures in the movement for disability rights such as the Rev. Wade Blank, founder of ADAPT (Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit) and its “mother,” the Atlantis Community in Denver, took “spiritual, organizational, and strategic” lessons from the civil rights movement.<sup>57</sup> Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Wade, a former War on Poverty field organizer and “disciple” of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. led a national non-violent, direct-action campaign to make public transportation, especially city buses, accessible to those with disabilities. ADAPT’s campaign’s to integrate the nation’s buses featured activists stuffing themselves into luggage compartments, forming human chains of wheelchair users to stop city buses in the streets, and being arrested and jailed for their civil disobedience. These images forged powerful symbolic and material links between disability rights and civil rights that rendered the struggle for disability inclusion both comprehensible to American audiences and legitimate within the confines of notions of citizenship premised on legal rights, public access, and inclusion.

Moreover, as Paul K. Longmore, Simi Linton, and other disability studies scholars have documented, disability studies as an academic discipline in the United States grew out of the disability rights movement and explicitly conceived of disability as a specific minority identity with a distinct culture and history to be studied along-side race, class, gender, and ethnicity.<sup>58</sup> This model of disability, which casts disabled people as a distinct minority with a unique history and culture, diverged from the social model of disability that emerged around the same time in Britain. Whereas the British model held that disability was a social phenomenon that, understood as such, could then permit a transformation of the social conditions of disability that would allow persons with disabilities to maximize their potential, the American model understood disability as a category of identity that could, when

harnessed and deployed, transform the conditions of possibility for disabled people in the United States.<sup>59</sup>

Without discounting the significance of the civil rights model of disability advanced by many activists as well as scholars in disability studies, I offer an interpretation of the Disability Rights Movement and *Everybody* exhibits that complicates the minority identity model of disability by showing how that model fails when differences in race, class, gender, and sexuality among disabled people are not accounted for. While productive parallels can be drawn between black civil rights and disability rights, conflation of the two creates serious historical, cultural, and political erasures that obfuscate the underlying structures of racial, class, and gender privilege and subordination that influence historical, as well as present-day collective and individual experiences of disability. Collapsing the histories of the civil rights movement and the disability rights movement also obscures important differences between the two movements. For instance, as the “Everybody” exhibition on “Civil Rights, Disability Rights” notes, public integration of those with disabilities entailed both legal and architectural changes.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, as curator Katherine Ott explained, although the story of disability rights was indeed a story about civil rights that powerfully displaced the medical model of disability, relating that story in the context of a museum exhibition required attention to structures of power that consistently work to define history in terms of white middle and upper class aspirations and perspectives that consistently imagine upward mobility and integration of differences as the hallmarks of American social and political history. Ott told the *Radical History Review* for instance that “Because the profession [of public history] is predominately white, lamentably heterosexual, certainly middle-class, and dominated by a



homogenous academic culture, I have to think about the possible tensions and power dynamics inherent in my work.”<sup>61</sup> The willingness of Ott and her team to think through historical nuance and negotiate the tensions and power dynamics that often elide such nuances and complexities in favor of easily consumable metanarratives affords public audiences and visitors to the museum the opportunity to call into question of dominant historical narratives of teleological progress and change premised on “overcoming” difference and prejudice.

Throughout the Disability Rights Movement and Everybody exhibitions for instance, the story of civil rights and integration for disabled people is consistently complicated by narratives and images of non-conformity and resistance to the norms and expectations of American democracy. Indeed, throughout these exhibitions there are signs that subtly subvert national narratives of social and historical progress premised on the integration of differences. “The Disability Rights Movement” exhibition’s first image, for instance, is a photograph depicting a 1994 ADAPT rally. Once known as Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit and now called Americans Disabled for Attendant Programs Today, about 50 ADAPT demonstrators are shown protesting with signs that read “Freedom Now” and “No More Pity.”<sup>62</sup> The back of one man’s wheelchair features a cardboard sign. The sign is partially obscured but the words “nursing homes” and “jail” are clearly visible. Two large American flags with stars arranged in the shape of the international symbol for disability access are the focal point of this black and white photo.<sup>63</sup> While the photograph conjures forth patriotic iconographies of democratic public activism in the service of civil rights, it also suggests the ways in which social and institutional practices of containment and regulation, such as nursing homes and jails, render civil rights unrealizable for segments of

the population not easily assimilated to American capitalist society. Furthermore, the appropriation of the American flag and the displacement of state stars intended to emblemize national cohesion in favor of an international symbol for disability access at once mocks ideas of national unity and suggests how such ideas are premised, not only on the elision of geographical, cultural, and historical differences, but also on the exclusion of morphological and cognitive differences. The notion of states united is thus upended in favor of a people united in opposition to specific forms of state oppression centered on disability.

The exhibition's next image, also prominently featured in the Everybody exhibition's "Civil rights, Disability Rights" section, performs a similar move. It depicts a 1989 ADAPT protest in which protestors are blocking two MCI New Jersey transit buses. The photo's central image is of a man in wheelchair. The back of the wheelchair features a hand-made sign that reads "I can't even get to the back of the bus." Both of these images feature captions and audio descriptions that note that the protestors are wearing blue jeans, t-shirts, baseball caps, and sneakers.<sup>64</sup> These descriptions of clothing do more than create a *mise-en-scène* for visually impaired visitors to the exhibit. They also suggest the social and class positions of the protestors. In so doing, they disclose how questions of access are also questions inflected by economic and social status.

The sign "I can't even get to the back of the bus" at once recalls pre-civil rights strategies of racial subordination and class stratification *and* exposes the limits of civil rights and minority rights discourses within disability rights and disability studies. This is because "I can't even get to the back of the bus" suggests that being in the back of the bus is or was somehow a privilege; a gesture that posits the notion that folks with disabilities are somehow worse off than black folks struggling against segregation were. This discursive maneuver not

only erases the activism for black civil rights done by African Americans with disabilities, but also, exposes how attempts to construct and forge a disability rights movement premised on identity can easily forge “disability identity” over and against black people and other historically marginalized groups. Thus we again see how disability is not a universal experience, but one bisected by race and class. It also calls attention to that inequities often thought be relegated to the past remain, in fact, in the present.

This same section of the Disability Rights Movement exhibition features a collection of political buttons and one bumper sticker. The bumper sticker reads “EQUAL RIGHTS ARE NOT SPECIAL RIGHTS” with “NOT” underlined for emphasis. One of the buttons features a black raised fist with the international access symbol on it. Another is hand-made and features a crutch that forms a raised fist along with the words “Power to the Disabled People’s Movement.”<sup>65</sup> The critique of the notion that rights for the disabled are somehow “special”—that is excessive, unnecessary, or unfairly advantaging—combines with explicit references to Black Power and Black Nationalist and separatist movements to expose the fact that rights have not been extended equally by the U.S. nation-state and, in fact, the extension of rights in the United States has historically been premised on the presumption of one’s sameness and “equal” capacity to achieve able-bodiedness and economic productivity. As Paul Longmore presciently and powerfully observes, the pervasive notion that disability rights represent “special” rights reveals that one cannot be different in the United States and expect to receive the rights protections required by that difference.<sup>66</sup> The extension of rights based on difference, therefore, is regarded as “special” and patently offensive to classically liberal notions of equality premised on the maintenance a homogeneous (read white, straight, middle-class, and able-bodied) populous. Amy Brandzel makes a similar observation with

regard to Colorado's Amendment 2 which, if it had passed, would have repealed all of that state's antidiscrimination laws that protected gays and lesbians. Brandzel notes:

Colorado argued that it was trying to treat everyone equally by disallowing "different" treatment for gays and lesbians. It was an attempt to apply a color blind approach to sexuality, the logic being that since sexual difference is not seen, the law should act as if it did not exist. Antidiscrimination law therefore granted gays and lesbians "special rights."<sup>67</sup>

The analysis of Longmore and Brandzel regarding "special rights" reveals how the presumption of able-bodiedness, "sameness," and heterosexuality is literally built-in to the social, cultural, and political fabric of the United States. This presumption positions both able-bodiedness normativity as synonymous with "citizen" and the extension of rights a notion that also consistently undergirds the narratives, histories, and practices of U.S. national belonging.

A protest poster in the Disability Rights Movement and Everybody exhibitions both underscores and resists this point, revealing the normalizations and exclusions inherent in civil rights and integration struggles. The poster features a coiled snake with the words "Don't Tread on Gallaudet." The snake is an explicit reference to the flag and slogan ("Don't Tread on Me") of the American Revolution. The words "We want a Deaf President Now" register that this poster was used in the "Deaf President Now" campaign of 1988 which ultimately led the installment of the first deaf president to head the nation's oldest educational institution for the deaf. The reference to America's revolutionary past attempts to connect Deaf struggles to a larger history of national struggle. In so doing, however, it also underscores how physical and cognitive differences have been consistently imagined as outside the "nation" and in need of patronizing supervision by hearing and able-bodied authorities.

The Deaf President Now Movement at Gallaudet sent a powerful message about how able-bodied normativity structures relations of power to marginalized difference. In this way, the protests linked the Deaf community to other disability rights struggles. Indeed, the international media coverage they received is credited with helping to galvanize support for passage of the ADA. In so doing the protests exposed the complexities and contradictions inherent in civil rights and social integration strategies. As Susan Birch has shown, the Deaf President Now protests grew out of a history of Deaf struggle committed to independence from, rather integration into, a hearing society. “The very notion of mainstream civil rights,” notes Birch, “is often inextricably bound to full integration.” The protests thus present “an ironic situation for the Deaf community.” This is because, to accommodate the integration signaled by the ADA, Deaf people must, to some degree, leave their behind their culture and community. “Success in civil rights integration thus conceivably means the dilution, if not destruction, of Deaf culture.”<sup>68</sup>

The struggles over integration and liberation inherent in the “Deaf President Now” campaign in many ways mirror debates about gay and lesbian rights. Queer theorists and activists have vigorously contested the integrationist visions propagated by mainstream gay and lesbian organizations as the Human Rights Campaign and Lambda Legal Defense Fund as not only excluding, erasing, and further marginalizing those who fail to adhere to the categories “gay” or “lesbian,” but also fundamentally bolstering and re-instating the heteronormative relations of power that ensure the oppression of non-normative others. As the Lambda Legal Defense fund noted in support of gay marriage, gays and lesbians, like other Americans “mow their lawns, shop for groceries, and worry about making ends meet. They want good schools for their children, and security for their families as a whole.”<sup>69</sup> But

what of those who do not, cannot, or will not mow lawns, participate in normative patterns of consumption, or have children? As numerous queer theorist have revealed, the radical political potential of queer theory lies in its ability to demonstrate how normalization displaces large groups of people.<sup>70</sup> A key contribution of queerness and disability studies has been to interrogate and explore the specific ways in which heteronormativity ousts people with disabilities from society and history.<sup>71</sup>

In the concluding section of this chapter, I focus on artifacts from the Everybody exhibition that posit a radical history of disability premised on valuing and embracing non-normativity and non-able-bodiedness as mode of politics and living that rejects mainstream social values of a “good life” premised on adherence to able-bodied norms and acquiescence to a capitalist society antithetical to disability. I argue that, like queer theory, the radical potential of disability lies in its capacity to question the “common sense” logics of a society organized around able-bodiedness and consumer capitalism. Rather than understanding disability as difference to be assimilated, I urge that we value its ability to envision radical forms of politics and community not tethered to dominant notions of success, fulfillment, and happiness which construe disabled people as possessing lives not worth living. I take of up Allison Kafer’s queer disability critique of recent trends in queer theory aimed at negating futurity in order to show how disability studies perspectives can complicate current queer theories in ways that productively advance a politics of interdependency not premised on advancing heteronormative futurity. Rather, following Kafer, I suggest a “future for crips” that necessarily rejects the heteronormative futures that have always been, and continue to be, predicated on the elimination of disability and disabled people.

## **Why Be Normal? Towards a Queer History of Disability**

The 2013 digital exhibition “Everybody: An Artifact History of Disability in America” includes a section entitled “Crip is Hip.” An enlarged opening caption suggests that this section concerns questions of identity and disability. “Valuing disability as a part of one’s core identity,” the caption reads, “is a principal of social empowerment.”<sup>72</sup> But rather than suggesting that there is an essential or singular “core” disability identity, or that “social empowerment” is an easily definable or achievable end, the objects, images, and narratives in this portion of the exhibition suggests the ways in which disability is socially and culturally ascribed. In so doing, the “Crip is Hip” portion of the exhibit prompts visitors to consider how bodies themselves are socially and culturally constructed and deployed in ways that do political work. There are, for example, buttons with slogans like “Crips Are Beautiful,” “Deaf Pride,” and “Dump Jerry Lewis.” There is a wheelchair Barbie, a set of earrings featuring the international access symbol, and t-shirts that read “Piss on Pity” and “I am not a Case and Do Not Need To be Managed.”<sup>73</sup>

In this portion of the chapter, I examine artifacts and narratives from the “Everybody” exhibit that reveal how disability and impairment can perform a politics of interdependency that calls into question cherished notions of individualism and able-bodiedness as prerequisites for economic “success,” aesthetic value, and social worth. I argue that, by prompting us to think about how bodies are constructed in social and cultural space, the items, images, and narratives of embodiment found in the “Everybody” exhibition permit histories and knowledges of disability rooted neither in heteronormative and able-bodied discourses of courageous personal struggle and overcoming, nor in normative liberal histories of progress, inclusion, and integration premised on teleological triumph over difference and

division. Instead, these items challenge and expose the systematic valuing and devaluing of bodies in cultural and social space and argue for a politics of mutuality, care, and respect that counters the ethos of hyper-individualism, disregard for others, and contempt for bodily difference pervasive under modern capitalism. I begin with a look at a short film featured in the “Crip is Hip” section of the “Everybody” digital exhibition that works to uncover how bodies are social and culturally constructed and are thus inherently political. I then move to a consideration of images and artifacts within the exhibit that feature bodies or evocations of bodies that iterate notions of interdependency and thus confront the valuing of some bodies over others.

The “Everybody” exhibition’s “Crip is Hip” section concludes with a short film in which Oakland based artist and activist Sunaura Taylor and preeminent queer theorist Judith Butler walk the streets of San Francisco discussing the ways that bodily variation exposes the social construction of able-bodiedness and disability. The film is framed for visitors as featuring a discussion about the social model of disability. As curators explain, the social model of disability “assumes that disability is malleable and a product of culture.”<sup>74</sup> Although a wheelchair user, Taylor explains to Butler and to viewers of the film that she uses the term walk. “I always tell people that I am going for a walk and that’s the term that most of the disabled people I know use.”<sup>75</sup> Taylor’s deployment of the word walk exposes and calls into question normalizing assumptions about what it means to walk and thus reveals how ideas about, and perceptions of, walking and not walking, ability and disability are constructed, imagined, and enacted within a social, cultural, and political sphere that often presumes the meaning of “walk” to be self-evident, definite, definable, and “natural.” As the camera pans an urban landscape we see a wide variety of people and bodies. Bodily variation



is emphasized in the visual frame. We see bodies using wheelchairs and bicycles, skateboards and canes. There are bodies of indefinite races and indefinite genders, and indefinite ages. As the conversation continues, it is clear that there is more at stake than the accessible streets, architecture, and public transit that enable Taylor to walk through San Francisco in a wheelchair.

Taylor explains, for instance, how, as a person with limited use of her hands, she goes about getting a cup of coffee. Taylor describes how she can grab cups of coffee with her mouth but, rather than do this, she typically elects to ask for and accept assistance. This is not only to avoid the awkwardness induced by nondisabled people typically made uncomfortable by Taylor's non-normative use of her mouth, but also because "In a way," Taylor explains, "getting a cup of coffee and asking for help is a political act. Help is something that we all need. But it is looked down upon in our society even though we are all interdependent and all need help in certain ways."<sup>76</sup> Butler, whose hugely influential book *Gender Trouble* reveals, among other things, that there is nothing authentic or natural about gender and that heterosexuality is naturalized through the performative repetition of normative gender identities, adds that one of the things that disability does for queer theory is to ask "What can a body do?"<sup>77</sup> This question, Butler explains, suggests that bodies conduct political work, that they are performative, malleable, and constructed, that there is no embodied essence, no ideal morphology. To illustrate this point, Butler relates a story of a Maine man apparently murdered for his expressive femininity. The man, Butler observes, possessed a "very feminine walk."<sup>78</sup> "How," Butler asks, "could a person's walk, their gait, engender such violence."<sup>79</sup>

Taylor and Butler conclude that what is at stake in asking such questions is a fundamental challenge to mythical liberal orthodoxies of able-bodied essence and superiority as well as individualism, and independence. Disability, Butler observes, allows us to “Re-think the body as a site of interdependence. Do we, or do we not, live in a world where we need each other in order to address our basic needs.”<sup>80</sup> Several objects and images from the Everybody exhibition materially and visually evince Taylor and Butler’s call to “re-think the body as a site for interdependence.” These artifacts disrupt the orthodox notions of a “normal” body that attempt to organize bodies around heteronormative capitalist structures of individualism and consumption, beauty and ugliness, ability and inability. For instance, a lavender apron featured in a section called “Intentional Communities,” reads “Kitchen Angels.” The caption explains to visitors that:

Meals on Wheels programs began in the 1950s to deliver meals to elderly people in their homes. Kitchen Angels is a version of this activity, founded in Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1992. It is one of many groups focused specifically on people with AIDS.<sup>81</sup>

The fact that (every)body needs food and this most basic of needs is not always met in the United States—even in the supposedly prosperous eras of the 1950s and 1990s—at once betrays the failures of contemporary capitalism and advances a politics of “intentional” interdependency both required, and made possible, by those failures. References to the elderly remind visitors that impairment and reliance on others is a fundamental part of life that need not be stigmatized. That Kitchen Angels is just one of many such programs serving those with AIDS at once brings forth a troubled history of homophobia, fear, exclusion, and death by social negligence for gay men and other marginalized populations and illustrates a politics of resistance to that brutal neglect. This apron thus links disability to an on-going history of resistance to heteronormative capitalism that values some bodies as worthy of

basic resources while rendering others disposable. It demonstrates how disability can forge and foster a politics that runs counter the neoliberal capitalist values described earlier by Longmore and Giroux.

In her book *The Queer Art of Failure*, queer theorist Judith “Jack” Halberstam contends that “While liberal histories build triumphant political narratives with progressive stories of improvement and success, radical histories must contend with a less tidy past, one that passes on legacies of failure and loneliness as the consequence of homophobia and racism and xenophobia.”<sup>82</sup> Xenophobia, of course, indexes a fear of difference. Such differences, Halberstam suggests, risks disrupting triumphant histories of perpetual success. Moreover, Halberstam argues, the erasure of differences that evince failure in conventional histories is linked to the naturalization and perpetuation of a capitalist system that constructs and produces “failure” as that which does not conform to the normative strictures and demands of heteropatriarchal capitalism. Referencing the work of historian Scott Sandage (the same Scott Sandage who championed the FDR Memorial’s wheelchair addition and chaired its inscription committee) Halberstam argues:

Failure, of course, goes hand in hand with capitalism. A market economy must have winners and losers, gamblers and risk takers, con men and dupes; capitalism requires that everyone live in a system that equates success with profit and links failure to the inability to accumulate wealth even as profit for some means certain loss for others. Losers leave no records, while winners can’t stop talking about it, and so the record of failure is ‘a hidden history pessimism in a culture of optimism’<sup>84</sup>

Halberstam claims to relate this hidden history of pessimism as a “tale of queer, anti-capitalist struggle.”<sup>85</sup> I want to suggest, however, that Halberstam’s “tale of queer, anti-capitalist struggle” is quite incomplete without a thorough accounting of the queerness of disability and the erasures that accrue by critiquing futurity without considering disability.

The Everybody exhibition also conveys a hidden history of “failure” but does in a way that emphasizes that it is not the “failure” of bodily difference, but the failure of able-bodied culture to recognize and support the radical value of that difference.

Queerness and disability are linked in the exhibition through an explicit critique of normativity. A focus on interdependency and morphological variation encourages visitors to consider the kinds of relationships and social structures that disability enacts and enables. In their “failure” to reify myths of able-bodied independence, these images and objects constitute a non-normative crip/queer history that reveals the value and power of disability to challenge the normalizing neoliberal capitalist order. As Halberstam notes:

We can also recognize failure as refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.<sup>85</sup>

In taking up “failure as a practice,” Halberstam asserts that the dominant heteropatriarchal capitalist culture insists on success and longevity by any and all means and therefore systematically devalues those who engage in subcultural practices that reject longevity and success as way to refuse dominant relations of power.

Critically assessing Halberstam’s celebratory use of failure and the implicit critique of heteronormative success, longevity, and futurity that Halberstam intends to advance, queer disability studies scholar Allison Kafer shows how Halberstam’s festive approach to failure as a mode of resistance to normalizing futurity and stability actually does “acquiesce to dominant logics of power” when it uncritically neglects disability perspectives. This is because, as Kafer incisively discerns, when we look at the dominant heteronormative society through the lens of disability, we recognize that our culture does *not* value or seek to compel

longevity and success under any circumstances. “A critique of longevity can begin to feel misplaced,” Kafer observes, “in a culture that continually supports cutting services to disabled poor people in institutions and nursing homes, two practices that may well ensure disabled poor people do not live long lives.”<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, Kafer blisteringly reveals how disability renders Halberstam’s proposals to transgress normativity by choice utterly trivial in the face of compulsory able-bodiedness. Juggling attendant care, scheduling bathroom trips in advance, relying on unreliable transit systems, and being delayed by the inaccessibility of one’s environment force disabled folks to adopt and re-formulate the “imaginative life schedules” Halberstam sees how selected alternatives to the status quo.<sup>87</sup> The “eccentric economic practices” forwarded by Halberstam could also include, as Kafer notes, the barter system for attendant and health care services that many people with disabilities rely upon in order to make the most of limited social services and resources. Since state services typically come with restrictions on how much money people with disabilities can earn and how long they can work in a given pay period, “eccentric economic practices” for disabled folks do not necessarily constitute a refusal to productivity that Halberstam sees as being at the “radical” heart of such practices.<sup>88</sup>

The implicit critique of normativity offered by artifacts in the Everybody exhibition focus on the “eccentric” practices of interdependency and support among people with disabilities that Kafer describes. In so doing, the artifacts glimpse the “radical” non-liberal and messy history that Halberstam tries, but arguably fails, to advance. We first counter a disability critique of normativity in a section of the Everybody exhibition entitled “Who is Normal?” Instead of suggesting that there is, in fact, a someone out there who is normal, the section asks visitors to consider the contingency and constructedness of normal as an

organizing category. The section's inaugural image is of a blue bumper sticker with the white lettering that proclaims "Why be Normal?"<sup>89</sup> As we move through this and other sections in the exhibition, we uncover fissures in the dominant able-bodied order. Captions in the "Who is Normal" section explain not only how "what constitutes normal" is historically-contingent but also how "What constitutes a disability has depended on who was being judged and who was doing the judging." For instance, the exhibition notes "a beggar, a war veteran, a baby, and musician may all have shared the experience of being blind, but stigma, discrimination, and access to resources would be different for each."<sup>90</sup>

In other words, curators suggests, disability is shaped by one's social and class status as well as by such factors as age, gender, and occupation. Sub-sections go on to relate how such things as vision, left-handedness, and literacy all shape how and whether a person is considered "normal" or disabled. A section on appearance relates how "Concepts of beauty and comeliness can influence how people are valued and treated."<sup>91</sup> An extended caption continues:

The way people judged a person's appearance was different when physical injury, crooked teeth and cavities, smallpox marks, and other scarring commonly affected people. People with such bodies were fairly normal. Then in the mid-1800s, some cities began to ban certain people from public streets. These so-called Ugly Laws were directed at people with disabilities who sometimes depended on begging for a livelihood.<sup>92</sup>

This passage links changing standards of beauty, ugliness, and normativity, to historical processes of urban industrial capitalism. In so doing, it suggests how such processes work to mark certain bodies as desirable and valued and others as undesirable and devalued.

Delineating bodies in this way serves not only as a basis for selling the accoutrements of correction needed to achieve the appearance of "normalcy," beauty, and desirability to a

population of consumers able to afford them, but also works to exclude certain bodies from the economic system altogether and thus render those bodies degraded and disposable.

It is these supposedly “failed” bodies that are the focus of the exhibitions next section. Entitled “People,” this section presents audiences with a wide variety of bodies while explicitly addressing the politics of interdependency these bodies require, make possible, and enact. We see people with missing limbs, atypically large or small body parts, and people using crutches, canes, and wheelchairs. Most often, however, we encounter images of bodies in pairs. These bodies lean on, support, clutch, hold, and embrace one another. A subsection titled “Interdependence” features images of people helping each other. We encounter a woman in the 1950s assisting a neighbor on crutches with her groceries, a young girl on crutches being helped out of swimming pool at a camp for youth with disabilities, and an image from the early 1900s that depicts a young boy who is cheerfully carried and embraced by peers. A carte-de-visite from the 1860s features two young men identified as friends locked arm-in-arm.<sup>93</sup> The text that frame these images alerts viewers that “Everyone experience degrees of independence, dependence, and interdependence. One of the most significant historical issues for people everywhere has been that of responsibility for their own lives. We all rely on society for basic needs and use various strategies to get our needs met.”<sup>94</sup>

The idea that “we all rely on society to meet our basic needs” and that we use the strategies available to us to meet those needs at once mocks, and gives lie to, conservative dogmas and neoliberal ideologies that hold that “responsibility” for one’s basic needs resides, not in “society,” but in within “the individual” who is always already figured as independent, autonomous, and able-bodied. These bodies, then, do the work of calling into question and

offending the heteronormative capitalist able-bodied order. These people and their bodies are not racially pure, white, unblemished, clean, orderly, or rich. As Sunaura Taylor explains to Judith Butler, the people she encounters on a daily basis frequently view her impairments and anomalous morphology with disdain, fear, contempt, and aversion because “it reminds people of their vulnerability, their dependence, and death.”<sup>95</sup>

These images thus suggest how the fear of “vulnerability, dependence, and death” structures the contemporary social and cultural production of bodies in ways that construe disabled bodies that were perhaps once considered typical as now threatening, repulsive, and “other.” In so doing they allow us to see how normative and ideal bodies are a fiction produced by modern relations of power that seek to cleave the “individual” from “society” in order to naturalize the neoliberal orthodoxies of individualism as irreproachable “common sense.” In this way they perform a crip/queer politics of interdependency that resist normative narratives and histories of disability as a challenge to be defeated by medical or technological intervention, social regulation or adherence to able-bodied norms and standards. They expose how narratives of historical progress are frequently quite regressive and violently normalizing and reveal how notions of ability and disability are constructed, mutable, and profoundly political.

An artifact in the “Crip is Hip” section expresses these ideas in a different way. It is a sign featuring the universal emblem for disability accessibility and wheelchair use which reads “I have evolved past the need for legs.” The image's ubiquity on handicapped parking signs and public buildings means it is instantly recognizable. It cleverly demonstrates the humor and politics of the disability rights movement by framing disability as an asset, not a detriment. It at once calls forth the absurdity of quasi-eugenicist discourses of evolutionary



bodily perfection and uses those discourses as point of departure for imagining a politics premised on the valuing imperfection. The crip/queer content analysis of the “Disability Rights Movement” and “Everybody” exhibitions I have undertaken in this chapter suggests the ways in which this politics of disability has been, and remains, on on-going struggle.

### **Conclusion: Disability Culture**

In a 1995 speech entitled “The Second Phase: From Disability Rights to Disability Culture,” the preeminent historian and theorist of disability Paul K. Longmore suggested what is at stake in how we understand the history of disability in the United States.

Longmore’s speech began:

The movement for disabled Americans has entered its second phase. The first phase has been a quest for civil rights, for equal access and equal opportunity, for inclusion. The second phase is a quest for collective identity. Even as the unfinished work of the first phase continues, the task of the second phase is to explore or to create a disability culture.<sup>96</sup>

While Longmore’s notion of a “collective identity” for the disabled now seems quaint in the light of nearly two decades of feminist, post-structuralist, and queer critiques of identity, his contention that we should explore or create a “disability culture” now seems more urgent than ever in a neoliberal consumer capitalist society that seem increasingly intent on delineating, defining, and regulating bodies in the service of hyper-individualistic, dehumanizing “marketplace” that assess the worth of human being and bodies by the capacity generate profit.

As Longmore extrapolated later in his speech, the modern neoliberal economy is both a “crippling economy” and one that seeks to “cure” disability. It is dominated by “non-disabled interests: vendors of overpriced products and services; practitioners who drill disabled people in imitating the ‘able-bodied’ and the deaf in mimicking the hearing; a

nursing home-industry that reaps enormous revenues from incarcerating people with disabilities.”<sup>97</sup> Moreover, at a time when the “crippling economy” of “cure” for the normatively embodied seems to also dominate humanistic sciences that are increasingly turning to “brain scans, mirror neurons, evolutionary patterns” and genetic manipulation in search of fundamental “truths” about the body and the human condition, the role of disability studies in challenging such truth claims seems evermore paramount.<sup>98</sup>

In this chapter I have used the material artifacts, visual images, and historical narratives found in the Smithsonian’s “Disability Rights Movement” and “Everybody” exhibitions to argue that the history of disability in the United States should be understood, not simply as a struggle to achieve equal rights and inclusion for the disabled, but as a history of resistance to normativity that challenges “common sense” understandings of the body as an index of “truths” determinative of one’s social, economic, and aesthetic value. I have shown how these exhibitions expose the social, cultural, and historical construction of “disability” and the disabled bodied and demonstrated how the histories of disability told by the exhibitions thus challenge neoliberal capitalist orthodoxies of individualism in ways that make visible an on-going history and politics of interdependency. I have, in this sense, endeavored to at once question disability as an organizing category of identity deployed by the state to regulate disabled people and to uncover a “disability culture” of interdependence that resist the normativities produced both by the market-place and by the sciences described by Gillman that attempt establish normativity as a governing “truth.”

In so doing, I have shown that history of disability in the United States has not occurred in “phases” as Longmore suggests. Rather, the history of disability in America, particularly sense the industrial age, exists along a continuum of struggle that challenges

conventional understandings of American history as a striving to achieve “a more perfect union.” In this way I believe this chapter demonstrates how queerness and disability methodologies can work with the practices and techniques of visual culture studies and the insights of scholarly critiques of neoliberalism to uncover histories of disability for public audiences tethered neither to able-bodied norms and assumptions about disability, nor to conventional liberal histories of triumphant struggle to overcome difference.

## Notes

1. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Butler argues that theories of sex and gender must consider are the materiality of the body becomes a site for the exercise of heterosexual hegemony.
2. Douglas Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 52. Baynton argues that the concept of disability has been used to justify inequality not just for those with disability but also other oppressed groups such as woman, African-Americans, and immigrants. Baynton states: “Disability is everywhere in history once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write.”
3. James B. Gardner, “Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Fall 2004): 11-21. See also, Thomas A. Woods, “Museums and the Public: Doing History Together,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol 82, No.3 (Dec, 1995): 1111-1115. See also, Ann-Louise Shapiro, “Whose (Which) History is it Anyway?,” *History and Theory* Vol. 36, No. 4 (Dec. 1997) 1-3.
4. Amy L. Brandzel, “Queering Citizenship?: Same-Sex Marriage and the State,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* Vol. 11, No.2 (2005): 187.
5. Audrey B. Davis, “Triumph Over Disability: The Development of Rehabilitative Medicine in the U.S.A.,” (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution, 1973), 4.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Katherine Ott, *The Disability Rights Movement* (Original Exhibition Script, National Museum of American History, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, July 2000), 5. Also Available online. The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, *The Disability Rights Movement*, “The Struggle For Self-Definition,” July 2000, [http://americanhistory.si.edu/disabilityrights/exhibit\\_self\\_definition5.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/disabilityrights/exhibit_self_definition5.html)
9. Ibid.
10. The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, *The Disability Rights Movement*, “The Right to Dissent,” July 2000, [http://americanhistory.si.edu/disabilityrights/exhibit\\_dissent4.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/disabilityrights/exhibit_dissent4.html)

11. The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, The Disability Rights Movement, "Missing Names, Stolen Lives," July 2000, [http://americanhistory.si.edu/disabilityrights/exhibit\\_self\\_definition7a.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/disabilityrights/exhibit_self_definition7a.html)
12. Ibid.
13. The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, Everybody: An Artifact History of Disability in America, "Places/Inside/Identity," July 2013, <http://everybody.si.edu/place/identity>
14. The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, Everybody: An Artifact History of Disability in America, "Places/Inside/Autonomy," July 2013, <http://everybody.si.edu/place/autonomy>
15. The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, Everybody: An Artifact History of Disability in America, "Disability and History/It's Complicated/Crip is Hip" and "Citizens/Activism," July 2013, <http://everybody.si.edu/words/crip-hip>  
<http://everybody.si.edu/citizens/activism>
16. The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, Everybody: An Artifact History of Disability in America, "Places/Outside," July 2013, <http://everybody.si.edu/place/outside>
17. The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, Everybody: An Artifact History of Disability in America, "Places/Outside/Removal" July 2013, <http://everybody.si.edu/place/removal>
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## Conclusion

This project began as an effort to investigate the influence of the disability rights movement on the production and reception of cultural and historical knowledge about disability in the United States. In completing it, I have sought to explore the presentation of disability in contemporary American public history in order to interrogate how visual and material representations and cultural narratives of disability found at places like the FDR Memorial, the U.S. Capitol, and the Smithsonian Institution guide our current perceptions of what disability is, and what its presence in U.S. history and culture means. I have worked to understand not only how national histories and visual and cultural representations of disability labor to forge the raced, classed, heteronormative, and able-bodied terms of including disability, and those with disabilities in American life, but also whether and how cultural representations and histories of disability for public consumption might begin to confound, complicate, and challenge those terms of inclusion by exposing the contradictions that exist between the principles of a liberal democracy and the exclusionary practices of a heteropatriarchal consumer capitalist U.S. nation-state premised upon the erasure, suppression, normalization, and/or celebratory assimilation of disabilities and differences that might otherwise call into question established orthodoxies of the body as an index of one's social, economic, and aesthetic value. I have learned that concerns over gender and sexuality, as well as race, class, and ability, have been central, not only to the history of people with disability in the United States, but also to the presentation of that history for public audiences.

In this dissertation I have argued for a radical queer disability studies approach to interpreting and presenting the history of disability in the United States. I have shown how



defining American disability history as a struggle against heteronormativity, rather than a quest for rights and equality, allows us to expose and challenge normative raced, classed, sexed, and gendered histories and narratives of national belonging and citizenship that necessarily exclude those disability perspectives and knowledges which call into view and critique the normative terms of inclusion in American life and history. I have demonstrated how attempts to render disabled people in history as “normal” replicate and reify the nondisabled perspectives, standards, and expectations at the heart of disability oppression. I have illustrated how a crip/queer approach to disability history reveals how cultural and political struggles over disability are necessarily economic struggles over access to the resources needed to sustain one’s life and have argued, furthermore, that historical as well as present-day contests over access to these resources cannot be disaggregated from the norms of able-bodiedness and heteronormativity that construe some lives and bodies as worthy of support and reification in U.S. history and culture while deeming other lives disposable.

As an intervention into American Studies, this dissertation has showcased the myriad ways that disability is central to the concerns of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality at the core of American Studies curriculum and practice. As a work in queer disability studies, this scholarship has demonstrated how queer theory and disability studies can enrich and expand the critiques of normativity offered by each of these fields. It is not only that disability has been defined through queerness—an insight made possible by queer theory—but also, that disability itself is thus crucial to the queer project of interrogating and challenging heteronormativity. A queer theory not attentive to disability and disability studies not only fails to confront the profound normativities produced by compulsory able-bodiedness, but risks reproducing and naturalizing those normativities in ways that normalize

and oppress disabled people while closing the nonnormative knowledges offered by disability studies.

As a project attuned to visual culture, this work has demonstrated how disability studies can add to the visual culture project of interrogating the relationships between power and representation. It has illustrated in turn how visual culture methods can be of use to practitioners of disability studies who have long been concerned with issues of representation by have often relied on literary, discursive, and semiotic analysis to address those concerns. Finally, as a body research concerned with the presentation of bodies in public history, this effort shows that national histories for public audiences need not be normalizing, trite, foreclosing, or violently occluding. Rather, histories for public audiences that place questions of physical, cognitive, and sensory variation at the center of the frame can work to produce new knowleges that challenge normative histories and open new pathways of understanding.

In my remaining pages, I want to discuss where my research on the presentation of disability in American history is leading me. I want to elaborate upon, and hopefully demonstrate why, an analysis of contemporary American culture and history grounded in deconstructive visual and discursive analysis and queer disability studies is becoming increasingly urgent in a globalized, neoliberal, visual and media culture saturated by images and narratives of bodily correction and normative assimilation via corporate, medical, and technological intervention, cosmetic erasure, and genetic manipulation. While the body of my dissertation focused primary on national narratives of disability, I aim to show here how those national discourses of bodily variation extend into the global realm of present-day U.S. Empire.

I begin with an analysis of a popular ad from this year's super bowl from the Microsoft Corporation. The ad's central trope is that technology promises cure and correction for disabled people and that, through technology, people with disabilities can become more human, more connected, and apparently (and not coincidentally) more heterosexual. In order to identify and probe some of the cultural and historical assumptions about, and continuities around disability, heterosexuality, and medical, technological, and able-bodied supremacy that circulate around and through Microsoft's super bowl ad, I turn briefly to a consideration of current debates over the genetic manipulation of fetuses to create so-called "designer babies." My interest in these current debates around genetic manipulation of babies was inspired, in part, by my research into the life and cultural persona of Helen Keller and I describe here how Keller's own investments in "positive" eugenics mirrors on a smaller, national scale Microsoft's much larger, globalized, twenty-first century rhetoric of nondisabled corporate corporealities supposedly made "better" by "overcoming" their disabilities through Microsoft's technology. I contrast the designer babies debate with the efforts of the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation to eradicate polio and argue that present-day discourses about designer babies and eliminating polio at once echo the eugenicists politics of Helen Keller's own time and signal an entrance into a biopolitical era characterized by extensive surveillance and regulation of embodied differences and disease. The Gates Foundation's polio eradication campaign (which I first encountered while conducting research on the polio exhibition) promises not only to eliminate disability, but also, to "overcome" differences in race, class, gender, religion, and nationality that threaten to impede U.S. imperial projects and neoliberal globalization efforts.

Let us now turn to the ad and Microsoft's vision of managing disability through technology. Entitled "Empowering Us All" Microsoft's 2014 super bowl ad promises to harness the "power of technology," to "unite us all," "inspire world history," and "give hope to hopeless and voice to the voiceless" while also, apparently, eliminating disability and difference. Everyone in this ad (including Sarah who hears her children for the first time, Hal who continues to paint despite loss of vision, Braylon who is unstoppable on his prosthetic legs, and former NFL player Steve Gleason who narrates the Super Bowl ad and "connects" with his children despite ALS) has a disability until Microsoft and "the power of technology" allegedly "empower" the disability away.<sup>1</sup>

Assistive technologies for people with disabilities have doubtless enabled those that can afford them to lead richer, fuller lives. But, I want to suggest that if we really believe in "empowerment" for us all we cannot afford to uncritically accept the central premise of this ad. Namely, that physical and cognitive differences are a "problem" to be fixed by corporations, the medical industry, and the benevolence of billionaires like Bill and Melinda Gates. The "medical model" of disability as something to be cured, corrected, or "overcome" through techno-medical intervention and social regulation does more than devalue and degrade difference while advancing techno-ableist discourses that glorify the power of technology to make us all the same and "successful" by corporate standards. This model of disability is also deeply imbricated within larger historical efforts to eradicate and eliminate differences of all kinds. From eugenicist-inspired efforts to sterilize and de-sexualize disabled people, to assimilationist projects that insists the Deaf community must hear, speak, and talk "like the rest of us", to the emergence of a modern biotech industry all too willing to

uncritically champion "corrective," "preventative," and "selective" genetic engineering of fetuses, we must not fail to discern the violent implications of Microsoft's message.

Difference, the ad suggests, is ultimately, and always already, bad, tragic, and of no value. It is also, as we shall see, perceived by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation as impediment to globalization. Correcting difference to become "normal" is thus inspiring and wonderful – especially if it boosts third quarter earnings while also bolstering able-bodiedness as the standard from which we must never depart. Importantly, the ad also encases disability in the blandishments of heterosexuality. Babies are being born, babies walking, laughing, crying, and playing. An image of a U.S. soldier overseas watching the birth of his (presumably healthy) child through Microsoft technology thus making the heteronormative family “whole” despite the ruptures and defilements of America’s global wars. Coupled with the rhetoric of “making world history” and “uniting us all,” these images link the elimination of disability to the defense of heterosexuality and, and by extension, to the defense of the U.S. nation-state itself. They also signal to viewers that heterosexuality is the benchmark of normality to which disabled and nondisabled alike must aspire.

My research into contemporary representations of disability in public history is what led to the understanding that, wherever one finds disability in visual culture, one also quite often finds heteronormativity wedded to narratives of national triumph and conquest over difference. The Helen Keller statue is, of course, one example of this. One of two commemorating Alabama’s statehood, the statue was the idea of Alabama’s now former First Lady Patsy Riley who once derided the U.S. Capitol’s collection of statues as “A boring Redwood forest of old white men.”<sup>2</sup> As I have shown, the statue was funded by corporate donors capable of giving at least of \$10,000 and sculpture Edward Havlka was urged to

depict eyes incapable of focus in way that would not be “grotesque” The statue not only served, however, to erase Keller’s considerable “adult” investments in socialism, feminism, labor rights, and black civil rights, it also effectively de-historized Keller’s lived experience as a disabled woman profoundly shaped by the progressive eugenicist politics of her time.

Keller was educated at the Perkins School for Blind, an institution founded by progressive reformer and early proponent of “positive” eugenicist Samuel Gridely Howe. Howe believed the disabilities and the social problems they created could be managed by surveillance and containment strategies as well as institutional education. Howe testified before the Massachusetts Legislature that he and his team of researchers had identified at least a quarter of million “idiots” in the state and urged lawmakers to appropriate funds for an addition to the Perkins school that would house and educate these “idiots” in order to eliminate the criminality, depravity, and deviance, their unchecked presences in society perpetuated.<sup>3</sup>

In 1915 Keller became enmeshed in a public controversy over the decision by Chicago physician Dr. Harry Haiselden not to perform potentially live saving surgery on the new born son of the Bollinger family. Haiselden cited the child’s multiple disabilities as his reason for not treating the boy. To the surprise of many, Keller published a letter in the New Republic supporting Haiselden’s decision on the basis that the child’s suffering and low quality of life meant that he should not be permitted to live as a matter of compassion. Shaped by the eugenicist and ostensibly progressive social reform ideologies of mentors like Howe, Keller apparently accepted that minimizing and normalizing disabilities was an important part of her vision for a better world. She noted that, “as mental defective” the Bollinger baby “is almost sure to be a potential criminal.”<sup>4</sup>

The vision of a better world with fewer disabled children continues to animate debates over disability and progeny. The same year that the Keller statue appeared in the U.S Capitol, fertility clinics began offering parents the option of selecting for genetic traits such as eye, hair color, skin tone. With the mapping of the human genome in 2003, the implications of genetic manipulation of embryos extend far beyond eye color. In England, Deaf activists protested a 2007 bill that allowed for genetic selection only against certain disabilities and diseases arguing that Deaf parents should have the right to select Deaf children if hearing parents could select for hearing children.<sup>5</sup>

In February of this year, The Food and Drug Administration began debating a proposal that would allow doctors to manipulate the mitochondrial DNA of fertilized eggs in order to ensure a child's healthy development in utero. Proponents of the procedure argue that since healthy mitochondrial DNA is essential to cell development the procedure is vital to preventing severe birth defects as well still births and miscarriages. They also point out that most of the genetic material that determines physical traits is not in mitochondrial DNA and but in the nuclear DNA and therefore any steps toward manipulating DNA for cosmetic reasons could be regulated or prevented. There is a difference, proponents insist, between manipulating genes for cosmetic reasons and manipulating them to prevent disabilities and defects.<sup>6</sup> NYU Medical Ethics director Arthur Kaplan insisted on Fox News for instance that "It's one thing to set out to repair disease by genetic modification. It's a different issue to say hey, I want to figure out how I can use this to make a baby taller, stronger, or smarter. Genetic Modification may well open the door to those things, Kaplan noted "But I'm not sure you can hold the babies hostage and say we're not going to fix diseases because it might lead to a slippery slope." George F. Will likewise insisted that genetic manipulation to prevent

defects was therapeutic and therefore justifiable. “If we can prevent crippling illness,” Will said, “it’s worth trying.”<sup>7</sup> Dr. Alan Cooperman, Director of Fertility at Mount Sinai Hospital told the New York Times that the “most exciting part scientifically” of genetic modification procedures is “being able to fix errors in the genetic machinery.”<sup>8</sup>

Disability Studies Scholar Michael Bérubé notes that debates over preventing birth defects frequently center on the nondisabled notion that having a child with a disability is always already terrible and should be prevented. Bérubé notes the implied assumption present whenever nondisabled strangers encounter his son Jamie who has Downs Syndrome. “Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather have a child without downs?”<sup>9</sup> This presumption structures “common sense” notions that genetic manipulation to eliminate disability is necessarily a positive social good. Failing to do so represents a form of violence against children. Thus, “holding babies hostage” to disability in the name of “ethics” is presented as plainly irrational.

Elsewhere in the media commentators and reporters dismissed fears of eugenicist pursuits as paranoia and Hollywood fantasy. In early March for instance, CBS this morning reported on the efforts of scientist in China to identify and isolate the genetic components of intelligence. The piece featured a clip from the 1990 film *Gattacca* along with medical expert voice overs explaining that genetic manipulation of embryos was likely to bring far more social goods than negative consequences. CBS’s feature ended with an earnest Chinese doctor explaining to audiences. “We want to help people. We just want to make the world a better place.”<sup>10</sup> On February 25<sup>th</sup> Slate Magazine’s Jessica Groce similarly dismissed concerns about the normalizing and violent potential of genetic selection. “Whenever a new fertility procedure is introduced, Groce wrote, Some commentators and ethicist will conjure



up a Gattacca-style eugenic future in which all embryos are presorted to look like Uma Thurman and think like Bill Gates.” But Groce insisted “Designer Babies aren’t coming the New York Times is just trying to scare you.”<sup>11</sup>

Such dismissals of concerns and fears raised by genetic manipulation erase, not only the long history of racialized eugenicist sterilization and elimination of people with disabilities, but also the on-going persistence of white supremacy and heteronormativity in the United States which continues to value and valorize certain bodies over and against others in ways that render some people disposable. An image of an implicitly ideal “Designer Baby” accompanied Groce’s piece along with caption “Baby by Gucci, Cheeks by Dior” The child is racialized as white with piercing blue eyes.<sup>12</sup> The reference to fashion industry giants frames the issue as a question of consumer choice, echoing Giroux’s politics of disposability.

The image was circulated throughout the mass media during late February as the FDA’s impending discussion on genetic manipulation ensued. It reflects an aspect of representing disability in visual culture that my investigation into public histories of disability consistently showed; namely that representing disability in visual culture for public audiences has long been not only a heteronormative project, but also a white nationalist project. This was true of my interrogation of representations of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s polio at both the FDR Memorial and the Smithsonian institution. FDR left his own legacy of eliminating birth “defects” as the founder of The March of Dimes, an organization that today holds the mantra “Working Together for Stronger, Healthier Babies.”<sup>13</sup> It was during my research on representations of FDR and polio that I learned of the efforts of the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation to eliminate polio in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria. The Gates foundation is the principal benefactor the World Health Organization’s Global Polio

Eradication Initiative. Documents outlining the Gates Foundation's strategy to eliminate polio echo Michel Foucault's contention that "a normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered upon the management of life and populations."<sup>14</sup>

For instance, the foundation notes that "A strong and sensitive surveillance system is critical for accurately targeting campaigns, making pragmatic adjustments in a timely and efficient manner, and quickly identifying and addressing polio outbreaks."<sup>15</sup> Throughout its strategy documents, the Gates Foundation emphasizes its intention to use "lessons learned" from the polio campaign as a platform for tackling other health and social challenges.

"Through polio eradication efforts," the Gates Foundation states, "partners have learned how to overcome logistical, geographical, social, political, cultural, ethnic, gender, financial and other barriers to working with people in the poorest and least accessible areas."<sup>16</sup> "The fight against polio the documents continue, "has led to new ways to achieve real impact on human health in developing world-whether through political engagement, funding, planning, and management strategies or research. As a result the Foundation and the GPEI has developed a wide range of assets including detailed knowledge of high-risks groups and migration patterns, effective planning and monitoring procedures, and a critical mass of political and organization commitment based on successful partnerships with global, national, religious, and local leaders."<sup>17</sup>

The language of the Gates Foundation is quite striking. Its pledge to use "lessons learned" from its polio campaign "to overcome logistical, geographical, social, political, cultural, ethnic, gender, financial and other barriers" in ways that will impact future initiatives to monitor "high risks" groups not only through technological means, but also through "political" partnerships with "global, national, and religious leaders" suggests that

the Gates Foundation's polio eradication effort cannot be disaggregated from larger projects and processes of U.S. imperialism at work in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The U.S. after all has been fighting a "global war on terror" in this same region for well over a decade. More than 40 polio vaccination workers have been killed in Pakistan alone since 2012; amid fears that the vaccinations serve as a means of sterilizing muslims.<sup>18</sup> This complex reality not only links the history of disability and sterilization in the U.S. to current processes of U.S. empire and globalization, it also reveals how the Gates Foundation has not exactly "overcome" "geographical, social, political, cultural, ethnic, and gender" barriers it claims to have.

What are we to make of debates over designer babies that run concurrent with efforts to eliminate disease and disability entangled with processes of U.S. empire? My research into the visual culture of the polio epidemic in the United States revealed to me how efforts to manage that disease were also a heteronormative and white nationalist project centered on preserving and defending the heterosexual family, saving children from the ugliness of disability, and preserving the prerogatives of medicine and consumer capitalism to profit mightily from fear of difference and the promise of a normalizing cure. Think now of March of Dimes poster child Cindy Jones and the injunctions to "protect" white families and children from polio.

Cindy Jones' experience, Helen Keller's foray into eugenics, and Microsoft's technocratic vision of world free of disabling difference and disease shows how ostensibly benevolent and positive efforts to "help" the disabled and disadvantaged are necessarily bound-up in a visual economy that privileges and advances the interests of heterosexuality, white supremacy, and hegemonic, normalizing globalization premised able-bodied norms of productivity, efficiency, and the erasure or assimilation of disabling effects of, in the words

of the Gates Foundation, “geographic, social, political, ethnic, gender, and financial” differences. For me, realizing this presents a clarion call to adopt queer disability studies perspectives in analyzing representations of disability and difference in American visual culture. Taking note of how disability is constructed and deployed in U.S. History and culture in ways that violently sustain white supremacy, able-bodied privilege, and heteronormativity is crucial not only to understanding our past, but also, to understanding our present and taking responsibility for a future that is not defined by global corporate wars against difference. This project thus marks the beginning of my on scholarly efforts to challenge violent normativity through research, critical cultural analysis, and a queer disability consciousness committed to social justice.

## Notes

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