

Discourses of Disability in the *Digest*

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Over the past twenty-five years, disability studies has emerged as a major new interdisciplinary field uniting the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. One focus of this field, especially in the humanities, has been on the ways that disability is socially constructed in a variety of discourses—medical, legal, historical, literary, visual, and popular (see Mitchell and Snyder). A central argument in disability studies is that the conventional biomedical model of disability constructed in so many discourses—that is, that a person’s identity is defined primarily in terms of a condition (for example, closed head injury, cerebral palsy, spina bifida)—must be replaced by a social model of disability in which a person with an impairment may choose to be defined primarily in terms of his or her identity within disability culture, with disability culture defined as a minority culture advocating equal civil rights and social inclusion.¹ Disability studies thus makes a crucial distinction between an impairment (a physical or mental condition) and a disability (society’s systematic prejudice that constructs and confirms the Otherness of the disabled). As Paul Longmore puts it, “Because disease and disability seem so self-evidently matters of biology, rather than sociology or public policy, the disadvantaging social and economic consequences endured by sick or disabled individuals are perceived as ‘natural,’ the inevitable social outcomes of biological ‘facts.’ But much of what Americans think of as the natural results of illness or disability are social and political artifacts” (147). This shift in perception is captured by a popular aphorism in the field of disability studies: “It’s not the wheelchair that’s disabling, it’s the stairs into the building.”

Theorists in disability studies have analyzed a variety of discourses that construct disability in problematic and pernicious ways. In a key work in the field, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman draws on numerous popular discourses (memoirs, letters, interviews, literature) to formulate the classic characterization of the disabled as Other. He defines stigma as “the

situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance.” Goffman explains:

By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class. We use specific stigma terms such as cripple, bastard, moron in our daily discourse as a source of metaphor and imagery. . . . We tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one. . . . (5)

Goffman’s original conceptualizations of the stigma of disability have been further theorized by a number of scholars, notably Lennard Davis and Simi Linton. In *Enforcing Normalcy*, Davis elaborates the nation-state’s response to disability: “[D]isability, as we know the concept, is really a socially driven relation to the body that became relatively organized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This relation is propelled by economic and social factors. . . . Preindustrial societies tended to treat people with impairments as part of the social fabric, although admittedly not kindly, while postindustrial societies, instituting ‘kindness,’ ended up segregating and ostracizing such individuals through the discursivity of disability” (3). Linton emphasizes the creation of a disabled identity: “[Disability studies] explores the crucial divisions our society makes in creating the normal versus the pathological, the insider versus the outsider, or the competent citizen versus the ward of the state. . . . Disability is best understood as a marker of identity. . . . [This designation], as reclaimed by the community, [is] used to identify us as a constituency, to serve our needs for unity and identity, and to function as a basis for political action” (2, 12).

Rhetoric and composition studies has begun a productive interdisciplinary relationship with disability studies in recent years. In a major new work, *Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness*, Brenda Jo Brueggemann traces the historically valued conceptualization of rhetoric as a “good man speaking well” and the ways that a consideration of disability can disrupt this figure. She analyzes scientific, popular, and pedagogical discourses in the construction of deafness as a handicap and as a cultural identity. In “Becoming Visible,” Brueggemann and several colleagues argue that disability studies offers rhetoric and writing studies

a way to conceptualize visibility, identity, and pedagogy; they contend that “it is in no less than a civil rights frame that we [the disabled] become visible” (369). These authors maintain that rhetoric and writing studies offers disability studies a way of “making the invisible visible and of examining how language both reflects and supports notions of Other. . . . [We can] embrace the critique of the (false) abled/disabled binary. . . .” The goal of such work, these scholars argue, is to “lead us all to ‘disability as insight’” (371). In this article, I posit that rhetoric and writing studies can make important contributions to disability studies, particularly in the analysis of the social construction of disability in popular discourses. Rhetoric and writing scholars are particularly well placed intellectually to see the complexities in popular representations of disability, our ability based on our long experience in seeing the critical value in discourses constructed by a wide variety of writers in a wide variety of contexts.

As Brueggemann, Linton, and Davis all note, one of the ways in which disability studies has challenged the pernicious binary of abled/disabled is through a critique of the representation of disability in popular culture. In popular culture (telethons, magazine articles, memoirs, charity advertisements) disability is most often represented in terms of the stuff of tragedy, pity and fear—pity for a life supposedly ruined by disability, fear of the calamity of disability brought to the reader’s or viewer’s own life. The feminist disability activist Jennie Morris notes that “it is non-disabled people’s representations of disability which dominate the general culture” (10). She describes this representation and its consequences in the following way:

A crucial element in this type of cultural representation of disability is a striving competitiveness. This goes together with an emphasis on the individual. Within this perspective, it is not society which disables someone by its reactions to limitations and difference but the individual who either fails to “rise above” their misfortune or who exhibits the personal strength and willpower to achieve “against all odds.”

. . . “Overcoming” stories have the important role of lessening the fear that disability holds for non-disabled people. They also have the role of assuring the non-disabled world that normal is right, to be desired and aspired to.

. . . The more energy and time we spend on over-achieving and compensatory activity that imitates as closely as possible “normal” standards, the more people are reassured that “normal” equals right. If we succumb to their temptations they will reward us with their admiration and praise. (101)

Any number of popular discourses are based on these stereotypes of disability. War movies such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *Born on the Fourth of July* present the emasculation of disabled veterans (see Gerber; Morris). Charity advertisements such as the one with a young woman claiming that a seeing eye dog is her best friend represent the perpetual infantilization of disabled women (see Hevey; Barton). Memoirs such as Christy Brown's *My Left Foot* present the model of individual achievement (Brown himself has called his memoir "my plucky little cripple story" [qtd. in Morris 95]). For the audiences of these popular discourses, a kind of catharsis can be achieved when pity is turned to admiration and when fear is allayed by a focus on the individual who models achievement under difficult circumstances.

A critique of popular discourse, then, reveals two intertwined themes: first, through its use of pity and praise, popular discourse reinforces stigma by portraying disability as a matter of individual achievement over obstacles; second, through its emphasis on the individual, popular discourse reinforces prejudice by rendering invisible the disabled as a group of citizens with claims to social and civil rights in American society. From the perspective of disability activists, popular discourse, including stories about people called Tiny Tim and supercrips, can neither represent the lived experience of a person with a disability nor achieve the perspective of disability within a civil rights frame (see Shaw). From the perspective of critics and scholars in disability studies, popular discourse is an important textual means by which people with disabilities are othered. In the eyes of both groups, popular discourse about disability is a primary object of critique.

I want to argue, however, that popular discourse about disability sometimes participates in what I will call a "de-othering" of people with disabilities in American society by presenting both a particular view of lived experience and a certain view of disability rights. The textual example I will present in support of this argument is an account of the discourse of disability in the *Reader's Digest* during its first thirty years (1922–1952). In the 1920s and 1930s, the *Digest* mainly forwarded the discourse of eugenics. In the 1940s and 1950s, the *Digest* first forwarded and then retreated from a discourse of disability rights. I will argue that the discourse of disability in the *Digest*, while incorporating appalling stereotypes especially in the 1920s and 1930s, is more complex than a procession of Tiny Tims and supercrips. In fact, I will show that the discourse of disability in the *Digest* was sometimes constructed in ways that reflected positive social understanding of disability in mainstream

America, making a potentially important contribution to an understanding of the lived experience of assimilation and to an understanding of rights as a social responsibility of the American public. This argument rests on an analysis of how the *Digest* underwent a sea change in its representation of disability during World War II, a change that was both political and social. It was a change that reflected at least a subtle advance in the representation of the social context of disability in popular discourse. I conclude from this analysis that the construction of disability in the *Digest* may raise important questions and concepts that should legitimately enter the field of disability studies.

Double Discourse in the First Year of the *Reader's Digest*

The *Reader's Digest* is the magazine that began by printing, as the cover of the first issue claims, "thirty-one articles . . . of enduring value and interest, in condensed and compact form" and became, as later issues claim "the most read magazine in the world." The *Digest* has a long and complicated history of covering disability. As is the case with many who somehow come to treat disability as a social concern (Traustadottir), the complexities may have begun with the personal experience of DeWitt Wallace, the conservative and iconoclastic founder of the magazine. John Heidenry, author of *Theirs was the Kingdom: Lila and DeWitt Wallace and the Story of the Reader's Digest*, notes that DeWitt's mother spent much of her adult life in and out of sanitariums, initially from the emotional and mental consequences of "hyperreligiosity" and later from complications of acute schizophrenia (24). DeWitt was apparently silent on the subject of his mother's mental illness, although the very first issue of the magazine includes Katharine Anthony's observation that "the mentally sick person is wrapped up in himself" (24). This is the stereotyped depiction of the mentally ill as morally unfit individuals who take up more than their share of resources and are therefore legitimate subjects for social debate about eugenics and euthanasia. Such is the focus of another article in the first issue, entitled "Can We Have a Beautiful Race?" (Wiggam). We can, concludes the *Digest*, if we decrease breeding from problematic groups such as the feeble-minded and the infirm, especially those from immigrant groups. In fact, argues the *Digest* in its first year, a man's scientific choice of a wife could alleviate many of these concerns about disability in our midst. E.T. Brewster writes:

Most departures from the normal condition are due to an inherent lack. Such, for example, are deaf-mutism, hereditary imbecility, the liability to

certain affections of the eyes, to respiratory and other diseases. These defects tend to disappear quickly when their victims marry into sound families. . . . There is no better working rule in choosing a wife scientifically than to marry one who is your like in all essential excellences, your opposite in minor faults. (188)

In the first representations of disability in the *Digest*, those with disabilities are feared and scorned, particularly when they use their disabilities to avoid honest work. An article entitled “The Modern Mendicant” directs its criticism at those who refuse the job placement services of charitable organizations in order to fleece the public:

The New York Institute for [the] Crippled vouches for the fact that a legless man, who works at the Grand Central Station in New York, draws down sometimes \$50 a day. The Institute supplied him with a set of false legs. He lives out of town, and comes in every day and checks his legs, and then goes to work begging. He was offered a regular job. “Nothing doing,” he said . . . “What can I make at a job? Here I’ve made as much as \$200 in a week. (Waters 234)

The most severe criticism, however, is reserved for those who would use a service uniform for fraudulent purposes: “Again, since the World War a very large number of men in uniform have made themselves obnoxious. Many professional fakirs were quick to see the advantage of a uniform, sometimes wearing spurious decorations for bravery” (234).

Yet in the same month, Mary Louis describes a contrasting class of those who wore the service uniform of the United States and became disabled in the process. These are the “good” disabled—the de-othered disabled, in contemporary terms—the ones who deserve our pity and praise, the ones who are grateful for attention from a charitable visitor:

You pass on to Lawrence, young, fair, blinded, one-armed, one-legged, wondering what ray of light or cheer can be made to penetrate the darkened world where he spends his days. He loves detective stories; so you sit down and read aloud to the breathless end, put beside him a box of strawberries that you have tucked away for him, and go on the rounds with the memory of a radiant smile and a wistful “Come again soon” for company. (249)

These are the courageous veterans who face disability with the pluck of American character: “Carey takes me to the window that I may behold his new glass eye, with which he fondly announces that he can wink, even if

he can’t see!” (249). Here, the disabled are portrayed for the reader to admire the American character under duress:

They are common men, of strange blends of blood and manner of upbringing; tender to each other, gentle to women, modest, rarely talking of their wounds, full of humor; hopeful when they know there is no hope; and imbued with a courage for future agonies. Derelicts of war who bear their burdens with smiling faces, and wear the scars of wounds, and pay the price of pain in the long night watches. (250)

The fondest wish of these crippled soldiers is to return to American life—to go home, to get a job, to marry. A veteran’s deepest fear is that “his girl won’t have him if they mutilate his body and scar him up” (250). In the discourse of the *Digest*, we should all be proud of these disabled American soldiers. We should be proud of their American families, too, particularly those “girls” who stand by their crippled men: “We write a note to his girl, who has kept the faith in spite of the ‘mess’ as he calls it, that the Boches made of him” (250). Finally, we should be proud of the actions of the American government on behalf of these disabled soldiers:

Here is concentrated the human wreckage of the war. As the base hospitals close, the slow-healing, chronic, and incurable cases are gathered together that everything possible may be done to occupy the minds and coax back activity to benumbed limb, and hope to hearts grown heavy with the long ordeal of pain. Everything that medical science and careful nursing and reconstruction aides can devise is done without stint. It has escaped the official taint in some marvelous fashion and is a kindly human business. (249)

From the perspective of the *Digest*, then, disability may be overcome or suffered through the strength of the American character—through courage, industriousness, optimism, and generosity. The disabled veteran is the figure *par excellence* of disability. The primary goal of one who is disabled is to assimilate into American life, and the appropriate role of American families, society, and institutions is to support that goal.

Along with these first articles about the concerns that disability raises for American society, then, is the *Digest’s* celebration of individuals (specifically veterans) with disabilities who assimilate into American life, though sometimes with great effort. This double, almost paradoxical, discourse of disability—an admirable inclusion into family and society alongside a conservative concern for society’s well-being—characterizes the *Digest’s* coverage of disability during its entire publication history. In

general, then, the discourse of disability in the *Digest* is a double discourse of similarity and difference: on the one hand, people with disabilities are considered different and in need of special services and support, which is itself cause for concern since the presence of disabled individuals can have costs for society; on the other hand, people with disabilities are considered similar, “one of us” and therefore capable enough to take advantage of the opportunity of assimilation, which is cause for admiration and celebration. Unlike most other popular publications, the *Digest* forwards both sides of this double discourse of disability, pursuing the celebration of disability while simultaneously exploring the concerns that disability raises for society at large.

Separate Discourses in the 1920s and 1930s

The discourse of celebration and concern are most notably seen in the first two decades of the *Digest*, when stories about the courage of individuals run side-by-side with stories about the cost to society of disability. The *Digest* was openly isolationist and eugenicist in the 1920s and 1930s. Isolationism was the underlying theme of frequent articles decrying immigration, almost always with a disability angle: immigrants introduced potentially disabling contaminants into the American stock, as reported in “Is the Human Race Going Down Hill?” (Robinson) and “Checking the Alien Tide” (Marcosson). Often repeated in the *Digest* in the 1920s is the warning that one of the social dangers of disability is prolific breeding: “[I]n this, as in all civilized countries, a considerable fraction of the population are feeble-minded, and these persons are on the average much more prolific than any other class and they transmit their peculiar deficiencies to their offspring” (Robinson 654). Eugenics is presented sympathetically as a sensible solution to this problem of disability. In “The Biologist to the Statesman,” Albert Wiggam, for example, defines eugenics in theological and scientific terms as “a method ordained by God for securing better parents for our children, in order that they may be born more richly endowed, mentally, morally and physically for the human struggle. . . . [Eugenics is] the duty of scientific research” (435). In fact, Wiggam declares, “if Jesus had been among us, he would have been president of the first world eugenics Congress” (435). George Cutten presents eugenics as the essential ingredient of democracy, especially in the face of dangers from socialism: “[N]ature has bestowed her gifts with an unequal hand. . . . [M]entality is unequally distributed. . . . By recognizing inequality as nature’s inexorable law, and that democracy can exist just as truly when we admit inequality as it

did when inequality existed without being admitted, we are placing our form of government on a substantial basis and in a position for progress” (289–90). In a eugenic tweak to the language of democracy, the *Digest* notes, “Democracy means, as it always has, government of the people, for the people, by all those of the people mentally able and morally capable of exercising it” (290).

Using anecdotes and statistics typical of the kind of argumentation found in the *Digest* in the 1920s, Maynard Shipley looks for a specific solution to the problem of disability in state sterilization laws that should be upheld and enforced. In “The Sterilization of Defectives,” Shipley writes:

The attendant in the baby ward lifted a tiny bit of flesh that stared with fishy eyes. “It will never talk or walk very much,” she said. “Its grandmother on one side and two of its uncles on the other, beside both its parents, are all low-grade imbeciles.” . . . The proper American response to such a situation is “There orter be a law [sic].” In California there is a law. . . . [T]he tendency of defectives is to mate with defectives, and the net result is some 20 percent of defectives in the American population. Certainly no good is being accomplished by perpetuating markedly imbecilic strains. . . . They grow up only to be a burden to themselves, their parents, and the State. . . . [W]hile there are 50,000 feeble-minded persons in the institutions of the country, there would be at least 500,000 if the institutions were large enough to care for all who are eligible to enter them. (633–34)

A number of other articles published between 1923 and 1938 made similar arguments promoting eugenic sterilization, including “Brains—A Family Affair” (Wiggam); a three-part series entitled “Better Brains—Or Bedlam” (Wiggam); “Mental Differences and Future Society” (Weeks); “The Question of Sterilization”; “Sterilization in Germany” (Thomalla); and “Pro and Con: Sterilize the Feeble-Minded?”

The *Digest* was not alone in forwarding the discourse of eugenics during the 1920s and 1930s. In *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, James Trent notes that hereditary explanations for disabilities, especially mental disabilities, surfaced within the frame of social Darwinism, a notion that was popularized around the time of the Civil War and that was especially prominent in America after the turn of the century. The debate over sterilization laws also was prominent at the time, with Oliver Wendell Holmes’ summing up popular sentiment in these words: “Three generations of imbeciles is enough.” In its reprints, then, the *Digest* could draw

from a wealth of popular material, including pedigree studies, such as the famous *Kallikak Family* written by Henry Goddard, a prominent medical superintendent of an institution for the feeble-minded, and even films, such as *The Black Stork*, an account of a physician who practiced passive euthanasia upon infants he deemed defective. The *Digest* also could draw on the well-known opinions of prominent people in support of eugenics, including Margaret Sanger, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Andrew Carnegie, Mary Harriman, Charles Beard, Luther Burbank, Clarence Darrow, and even Helen Keller (see Trent 137; Pernick 89). At the time, eugenics was even discussed in terms of rights. Martin Pernick, for example, notes that the prominent eugenicist Karl Pearson argued that “everyone, being born, has the right to live, but not the right to reproduce his kind” (99).

In the *Digest* of the 1920s and 1930s, though, the discourse of eugenic concern appears alongside the discourse of celebration. The *Digest* has a number of broad categories of celebratory discourse. By far the most frequent are heroic medical narratives in which the deaf hear, the lame walk, and the blind see—thanks to the advances of American science. In the 1930s, the *Digest* would feature such articles as “Adding Inches to Crippled Legs” (“Adding”), “Patron of the Preemies” (Liebling), and “Salvaging the Spastics” (Chamberlain). The latter features a spastic who goes to medical school and develops new rehabilitative techniques for those similarly afflicted. A second broad category is faith and miracle narratives in which the Lord participates actively in cure and management; featured articles from the 1930s include “Healing at Angelus Temple” (Worthington), “Father Power’s Grave at Malden” (Talbot), “Sight by Faith” (Harrington), and “Bedside Miracle” (Ratcliff). A third broad category—and the one most interesting for the argument here—is the character narrative in which disability is overcome in reality or in attitude via the strengths of the American character. These stories tend to be profiles of the famous—for example, articles about Helen Keller (Coates) and Lou Gehrig (Gallico)—and the anonymous, including profiles of veterans of wars (Lewis); volunteers who participate in training “Dogs that Lead the Blind” (Searle); parents who are loving but firm in their insistence on a normal life for a crippled child (“My Child”); and parents who recognize that their child is better off in an institution (Carey). Some are complete success stories, such as “Seeing Again after 30 Years” (Fish); others are management stories, such as “On Being Deaf” (Smaltz). All stories feature a character who prospers through American virtues. For example, “The Boy Who Could Never Run” (Williams) cries

in frustrated defiance to his playmates, “I could run before, and I can still run—you guys just wait and see if I can’t!” (89) With the help of his family, he devises his own massage program that results in a high school record for the mile, a record in Kansas until November 1934.

Adults, too, can illustrate the strengths of American character in the way that they cope with disability. In “Life in an Iron Lung,” published in 1937, the son of a prosperous Chicago businessman lies “prostrate but undismayed,” working hard every day at breathing independently (44). In “The Anatomy of Courage,” a humble teacher from a boy’s school puts himself through an intensive physical and mental rehabilitation, noting that his hardest struggles have been against self-pity, which he held as “one of the cheapest of human emotions” (28). The struggle, again, is to become a productive American citizen, which he accomplished: “When school opened I was able to go back, teaching in my wheelchair and bursting with happiness at being among people again and in the work that I loved” (27–28). Clearly, Americans are ingenious, courageous, stoic, disciplined, and loving; above all, they are optimistic individuals who won’t quit, even in the face of disability. In the discourse of celebration, they are an inspiration to us all.

In the *Digest*, the discourse of celebration is profoundly conservative, especially vis à vis race, gender, and class. None of the heroes and heroines of these tales from the 1920s and 1930s are African American; almost all are white and middle class. Most of the tales depict male heroes, although heroines are not uncommon. Women, though, are typically portrayed in traditional, non-disabled roles—mother of a child with a disability, for example, or supportive wife of a disabled veteran. These women may sometimes flirt with the edges of gender roles, as does the mother who raises her daughter to be a “career girl,” even though tradition usually prevails. The career girl in one story is not yet married, but she has had “proposals,” and she will “probably marry within the next few years” (“My Child” 56). Articles in the *Digest* portray the proper role of a woman mainly in terms of facilitating the assimilation that is at the heart of these narratives. Socially and politically, these are narratives of assimilation to the dominant American society, with its primary emphasis on individualism and its assumption that the promise of America lies in the opportunity for individuals to assimilate, whatever the obstacles.

In the 1920s and 1930s, then, the discourse of celebration and of concern appear alongside each other, but they are not intertwined. Articles that celebrate the American character of those with disabilities never mention articles that recommend eugenic sterilization (sometimes steril-

ization of people with the same disability). Likewise, articles that explore eugenics never mention those that celebrate individual achievement. The contradictions and paradoxes within the double discourse of disability thus go unremarked in the *Digest*.

Discourse and Disability in the 1940s and 1950s

World War II brought about a significant change in the discourse of disability in the *Reader's Digest*, a change framed by the necessary political changes in the magazine's editorial policy. The *Digest* was strictly isolationist in the 1930s, but that policy was discarded with a vengeance once America entered the war. Heidenry notes:

At the time of the attack [on Pearl Harbor], the January issue of the *Digest* was already [in] press. The next morning, Wally stopped the presses and replaced all six pro-isolationist articles with art-of-living and other noncontroversial features. . . . Thereafter, the *Digest* became as passionately jingoist as it had been isolationist, though its war fever was always tempered by a lingering ambivalence toward Nazi Germany.

On the other hand, no matter what Roosevelt did, he could never do enough to please the newly bellicose patriots of Pleasantville. As before, the magazine continued to run three articles unfavorable to the administration for every one that could be counted friendly" (130–31).

In spite of this shift in editorial policy, the *Digest* would reluctantly abandon support of the Nazi eugenics program. After World War II began, the *Digest* would print one final article in 1941 on eugenics, William Shirer's "'Mercy Deaths' in Germany." Shirer recounts a suspicious bombing of a facility for mentally deficient children that housed the mercy killing program. Yet, the article also transfers blame for the program from the Nazi eugenics movement to the S.S. Shirer explains that although three motives have been offered among Germans for the so-called mercy killings, the motive seems "most likely"—that is, that the mercy killings are "simply the result of extreme Nazi eugenic and sociological ideas." He writes:

For years radical Nazi sociologists who formulated the Reich's sterilization laws have pressed for elimination of the mentally unfit. The letter sent to relatives of "mercy-killing" victims reflects this sociological thinking—"In view of his incurable ailment, his death . . . is to be regarded as a release."

But an important German official commented to one American correspondent in Berlin: "My dear fellow, why try to find a reason which

makes sense by your way of thinking? The S.S. wants to do it, and so the S.S. does it. No other reason is necessary and probably none exists." (58)

Here, the blame for the eugenics program is carefully attributed to "radical" elements in the Nazi program; the *Digest's* support for eugenic sterilization, then, is still possible, although even the *Digest* seems to draw the line at involuntary euthanasia of the disabled. Despite its apparent effort to preserve the opportunity to return to a more moderate eugenic discourse, however, the discourse of concern (expressed primarily in eugenicist terms) disappears from the pages of the wartime *Digest*.

The discourse of celebration, though, would continue in the *Digest*, now in ever more patriotic terms and with a focus on the American veteran, whose figure provides a ready illustration of the strength of the American character embodied by the war hero. In J.P. McEvoy's "They Walk Without Legs," for instance, a Pittsburgh businessman who used artificial legs himself begins to help veterans see that they can return to the productive life of an American citizen and even resume semi-active duty or defense work. In the 1940s, the *Digest* would feature numerous narratives such as this that describe newly established rehabilitation programs for veterans. For example, Albert Maisel's "Out of Bed—Into Action" appears in 1943; Frederick Painton's "So They Can Walk in the Light," Alexander de Seversky's "I Owe My Career to Losing a Leg," Robert Littell's "How Our Wounded Come Back from Normandy," and Meyer Berger's "Our Wounded Come Home" (the story of a hospital train on which there are "no complaints, no whining"), all appear in 1944 (Berger 71). The companion piece to "They Walk Without Legs," Arline Boucher and John Tehan's "They See Without Eyes," appears in 1945, and Phyllis Duke-Elder's "One Eye as Good as Two" appears in 1946.

By linking the representation of disability with the figure of the American veteran during World War II and afterwards, the *Digest* explicitly and emphatically celebrates veterans with disabilities and thereby portrays them as worthy figures deemed to be valued members of society. Given that the majority of articles about individuals with disabilities in the 1940s are about veterans, this figure would play a substantial role in articulating the discourse of concern to the discourse of celebration during this decade of the *Digest* and, as we will see shortly, even in moving the *Digest* toward a discourse of rights. Thus, the figure of the disabled veteran is quite powerful inasmuch as it becomes a vehicle for a deothering to occur in the pages of the *Digest*. The connection between the disabled veteran and the war hero is an familiar one in popular discourse,

which at the time took on the important ideological work of promoting the war effort at home and abroad. The disabled veteran is also an obvious figure of distributive justice in American society. That is, by giving his body to the republic (in the form of amputation, for example), the veteran has a legitimate claim to a validated life in society. The disabled veteran is therefore a relatively comforting figure within the socially conservative view of the *Digest*. Not surprisingly, the disabled veteran portrayed in the *Digest* is a white, working or middle-class male (a few veterans were noted to be “Negro,” but female veterans and veterans from other ethnic groups were invisible). The historian David Gerber offers a more political interpretation. He notes that particularly during and after World War II, “disabled veterans became a major project of the modern state, which endowed them with recognition as a group worthy of continuing assistance, and with entitlements in the form of advanced medical care and prosthetics, pension schemes, vocational rehabilitation, and job placement” (3). Politically, then, the *Digest* would participate in the state’s project of privileging worthy disabled veterans over disabled civilians—that is, civilians who represent, in the discourse of concern, a potential cost to society at large. This project, incidentally, is one that veterans themselves, or at least their organizations, would enthusiastically support. Gerber explains:

The liberality of the veterans’ [benefits] results from the belief, widely articulated in seventeenth-century England and during the French Revolution and the American Civil War and universally accepted in the twentieth century, that assistance to veterans should not be charity or “welfare,” in the sense that contemporary term is used to connote aid grudgingly provided those popularly considered the unworthy poor. . . .

In contrast to social provisioning for the poor, . . . it has come to be governed by understandings that the dignity of those to whom it is given must be preserved and that their provision is an entitlement. . . .

The boundaries of civilian and veterans assistance have been well patrolled by governments . . . [and] veterans advancement organizations, which have worked to ensure that the assistance given to their members was always construed as an entitlement, . . . mixed as little as possible with the civilian welfare system. (12–13)

This kind of treatment of the disabled veteran, Gerber notes, effectively re-masculinizes him through rehabilitative services and vocational training, thus returning him to the status of a powerful and autonomous male citizen of the land. The *Digest* would popularize this political and social

project, perhaps as part of a larger project of preparing the nation to reinstate after the war the traditions of privilege associated with race, gender, and class. The celebration of the disabled veteran, then, generally fits in with the *Digest*’s socially and politically conservative agenda. The *Digest* thus celebrates the disabled veteran who embodies key features of a conservative view of the American character: courage, persistence, productivity, and the desire to assimilate. Most of the articles about disabled veterans published in the *Digest* in the 1940s perpetuate the discourse of celebration. However, in a remarkable few articles in the late 1940s, the *Digest* actually portrayed disabled veterans as a cohesive social group of American citizens, citizens with rights that society must not only acknowledge but also advance.

In the 1940s, several articles would bring together the discourse of celebration and of concern by contending that disabled veterans’ pursuit of assimilation ought to be seen and acted on in terms of integration and even civil rights. During the war, a new conception of the productive contributions of the disabled begin to emerge, explicitly setting the stage for the integration of disabled veterans into American life—albeit American life defined by the able-bodied majority, not the disabled minority, and integration defined mainly in terms of assimilation. For example, in T.E. Murphy’s celebratory “Man-Salvage Clinic,” we learn that in 1942 “Connecticut is rounding up the lame, the halt and the blind to help win the war. Hard pressed for manpower, its industries are hiring at the rate of 4500 a month men and women listed with the Workmen’s Compensation Commission as having some physical disability, small or great” (65). Noteworthy here is the shift from the term *handicapped* to *disability*, for throughout the 1940s the *Digest* used *disability* to refer to veterans and civilians contributing to the war effort. Also noteworthy is the frank speculation about changing social conditions after the war. Murphy observes that “the Man-Salvage Clinic” is bringing about changes in the attitude of employers which are bound to have important effects in postwar years. There is no use glossing over the grim fact that there will be many disabled men needing jobs when this war is over. Anything which breaks down prejudice now will make their way easier” (66). Prejudice, then, can be overcome through a recognition that the disabled possess a potential to achieve the esteemed American value of productivity. And veterans themselves would also hold this view. In 1947, Edgar Jones writes, “One abiding faith keeps the wounded looking ahead: their determination to get out and hold down a steady job” (70). Like the disabled civilians rounded up in Connecticut, disabled veterans are eager

to keep on contributing to the war effort. As Charles Stevensin observes in 1944, “The record shows that handicapped veterans prefer work connected with the war. Many of them feel like the ex-Terre Haute jukebox tender who after Guadalcanal became a Washington airport guard ‘because it’s the closest thing I could get to the Army’” (81).

A number of other articles would address issues of integration, explicitly arguing that society has important responsibilities in its treatment of disabled veterans who would soon come home. In a 1944 article entitled “How to Treat Them,” Emily Post reiterates the basic rules of good manners for the American public: don’t stare, don’t point, don’t ask intrusive questions. Assistance is to be offered only if requested, and then in a low key, “matter-of-fact way” (72). Families of disabled veterans, Post cautions, have the special duty to “remember that the one thing that helps is to make him realize he is not any different from the man he was—and to assure him that he is *not* to be set apart” (73). Exemplary employers are ones who have seen the value of hiring productive disabled workers, and society at large is praised when it utilizes its resources in the integration of disabled veterans. As Stevenson remarks, “The board has the aid not only of the Red Cross Home Service but of the local branch of a national committee which includes unions; farmers’, veterans’, and businessmen’s service organizations; and trade associations” (80–81). These articles contend that integration is the right thing to do, the right way to help veterans return to American life, to “have their freedom at last” (Jones 70). In these articles, the *Digest’s* anxieties about disability, its view of the social cost of providing for citizens with disabilities, are no longer channeled into a discourse of concern. At this time, social concerns about disability focus on the assimilation of the special class of American veterans, while the right thing to do is at the same time conceptualized in talk of civil rights.

Toward the end of the war, the discourse of concern would take a political turn as the *Digest* would take advantage of disability to express even greater patriotism than the American government. In 1944, the *Digest* would ask “What is Happening to the Veterans Who Come Home?” (Stevenson) and then remind readers in 1947 that “The Wounded Still Fight” (Jones). These articles are framed by the *Digest’s* ongoing criticism of the Roosevelt administration, by such editorial teasers as “Are they being neglected by an ungrateful Government?” (Stevenson) and noting “Lest we forget—” (Jones). Like any *Digest* article on disability, they use inspiring vignettes and statistics to make the given argument compelling. In “What Is Happening to the Veterans Who Come Home?”

Stevenson uses anecdotes about disabled veterans to establish their potential productivity. He observes: “[Joe] felt he had to do more with one arm than men with two. *The vast majority have refused to remain casualties; like Joe, they are working today*” (79). Statistics convey the urgency of the work of the newly established Veterans’ Administration. Stevenson urges: “The task of reinstating veterans cannot be postponed until after the war; it is already upon us. Discharges for disability are running at the rate of about 60,000 a month and increasing” (79). To be sure, this article is the most prominent instance I have found in which the *Digest* represents disability in terms of rights and their enforcement. Stevenson reports that when “discharge time nears, every veteran gets a handbook explaining his rights.” He explains:

... Does he want vocational training or a chance to resume an interrupted education? Veterans are entitled to these free. . . .

Does he want his old job back, within 40 days after discharge? If fit for it and the boss’s status is unchanged, the veteran goes on the payroll—or the draft board’s reemployment officers complain to the U.S. Attorney.

If the veteran wants a new job . . . [he can select] from 30,000 job classifications [for] work suitable for ex-servicemen, and [check] to find out whether the jobs can be done by men with one arm, with impaired vision, and so on. (80)

This article goes beyond job placement to anticipate affirmative action. Stevenson writes: “Industries everywhere are asking VES to recruit for them. Henry Kaiser has announced he will give preference to handicapped veterans” (81). In this period, then, the discourse of celebration and of concern actually converge in the pages of the *Digest*. The discourse of celebration continues to emphasize themes of American courage, productivity, perseverance, and independence that are exemplified in the figure of the American veteran. The discourse of concern turns to the integration of those veterans with disabilities into American society, claiming it is as the right thing to do, something that is legitimately defined and protected by their rights. In the 1940s, the discourse of concern focuses on these rights and the integration of disabled veterans in the context of an indifferent government. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the dominant theme would remain assimilation to the majority, with the responsibilities of the majority being broadened in a significant way: American society is now expected to do the right thing, to “bring about changes in the attitude of employers,” families, and civilians at large (see Murphy, 66; Post; Stevenson). This is a view of society’s responsibility

that continues as the backdrop to the discourse of celebration in the *Digest* of the 1950s and beyond. Here, de-othering is accomplished through an argument that bases rights on the right thing to do.

Although the *Digest's* view of social responsibility as the right thing to do would be adopted as the standard background for articles about disability after the late 1940s, its focus on rights would be short-lived and temporary. After the war years, the representation of disability in the 1950s changes once again, with the discourse of celebration made distinct from a newly emerging discourse of concern that criticizes the cost of social programs, such as Workmen's Compensation and Social Security, and that culminates in the current backlash against civil rights law and the perceived folly of laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The discourse of celebration would profile individuals and families who strive to assimilate into American life. For example, Alice Haines' "I Am a Blind Farmer" and Robert Littell's "Saga of the Faceless Boy" both appear in 1953, followed by countless additional examples. (Most recently, Edwin and Sally Kiester's "Does Your Child have a Learning Disability?" offers an educational assimilation story of a child who manages to receive As and Bs like his peers.) In the 1950s, there is a consistent difference in the portrayal of society's relationship to disability as a result of the de-othering of disability that occurs in the pages of the *Digest* in the 1940s. Society's responsibility to do the right thing by assimilating and integrating those with disabilities constitutes the contemporary background for the discourse of celebration. For example, Amy Selwyn's "Don't Let Mental Illness Scare You," published in 1954, repeatedly emphasizes the theme that we can "fear it less by understanding it more." A noted authority instructs families to treat a recovered patient "exactly the same as someone who has been in the hospital with a broken leg. Trouble looms when the family or friends feel that anyone who has been through mental illness must be queer and is not to be trusted" (128). The right thing to do, in other words, is to allow the former patient a chance to assimilate, to return to being an individual with normal relations in society. For the *Digest*, this is at least a subtle difference in the representation of the social context of disability, especially mental disability, one that departs from the argument for eugenic segregation in the 1920s and 1930s.

In the 1950s, however, the *Digest* develops a new discourse of concern that initiates a backlash of criticism of those who would challenge the focus on assimilation by turning it into an issue of civil rights litigation for a minority. By the 1980s and 1990s, disability law is the routine focus

of a column entitled "Mugged by the Law" and of articles that regularly report scandalous disability fraud—for example, Trevor Armbrister's "Disabled . . . Or Dishonest?" and "A Good Law Gone Bad"; Randy Fitzgerald's "America's Shocking Disability Scam"; James Bovard's "A Law that is Disabling Our Courts"; and Dale Van Atta's "Disabled By a Paper Cut." This, perhaps, is to be expected, given the conservative nature of the *Digest* and its carefully limited practice of de-othering—a practice that separates assimilation and integration from the possibilities of civil rights. The discourses of disability in the 1950s *Digest*, then, became separate discourses of celebration and concern once more.

Conclusion: Valuing the Discourse of Disability in the *Digest*

Textual analysis of the *Reader's Digest* in the late 1940s shows how this particular popular discourse does, in fact, question the stigma of disability at a given moment in time, validating identity in terms of assimilation, and even exploring the validity of legislated rights. This is a disruption in the representation of disability in the *Digest* that I believe has important and legitimate implications for disability studies today. To be sure, this disruption comes from a politically conservative view that the deserving disabled can be defined distributively as those who have performed an important service, and it forwards an even more socially conservative view that the deserving disabled are those who choose to assimilate into mainstream culture. It is also true that the civil rights view that would be promoted in the late 1940s and early 1950s does not become influential in the pages of the *Digest*; in fact, quite the opposite is true. Yet, this analysis reveals that in contrast to the assumption that popular discourse always stereotypes and never legitimates the lived experience and structural inclusion of those with disabilities, there is an instance of argumentation that successfully engages in a practice of de-othering, an argument that claims that the right thing to do is to construct a society that implicitly extends the rights of integration to its citizens with disabilities. I think the argument that links rights with the right thing to do has been crucially important in changing attitudes toward disability from the eugenic discourse of the 1920s and 1930s to the assimilation discourse of the 1940s, 1950s, and beyond. It represents an advance—perhaps, given the conservative nature of the *Digest*, a sea change—to move in one decade from advocating the legislation of eugenic sterilization to advocating the assimilation of the disabled. The success of this argument represents a significant advance in the understanding that those with disabilities are a part of American life, and thus it accomplishes important rhetorical,

cultural, and ideological work that arguably has been valuable to the progress of Americans with disabilities.

Having made this argument, I am nonetheless well aware of the ways that this argument remains subject to the critique of disability studies. The social model of disability created and assumed in the *Digest* in the 1940s and 1950s is not the perspective of inclusion via civil rights; rather, it is the perspective of inclusion via assimilation, with society's responsibility defined rather benignly in terms of the right thing to do. This is by no means the full perspective of disability studies. As both Linton and Morris argue, assimilation is problematic because it forces those with disabilities (or those with other marked differences, for that matter) to conform to the dominant culture, leaving well-established power structures and relations in place. I would argue, however, that assimilation is nonetheless interesting for disability studies, not because it is a coerced choice but precisely because it is a frequent choice. Disability narratives of resistance—for example, narratives appearing in activist publications such as the *Disability Rag*, in trade publications such as Michael Bérubé's *Life as We Know It*, and even in scholarly publications such as Linton's *Claiming Disability*—can be read as declarations of certain choices of identity and of an understanding of the social and political nature of disability. Disability narratives of assimilation, however, such as those that appear in the *Digest*, can be read as declarations of different choices in the definition of assimilated identity and the meaning of social inclusion in American life. I recognize that disability narratives of assimilation are problematic in the many ways identified by disability studies. More specifically, the agency granted to this particular life course and its narrativization is more readily available to people with certain kinds of disabilities (for example, motor disabilities) than others (for example, mental disabilities). In addition, the focus on assimilation may leave in place the dominant binaries of abled/disabled and normal/abnormal. I am mindful of the danger in making an argument that values gradual social change, which can too easily be construed as an argument that impedes further progress and more radical social change. What I have tried to argue here, however, is that this particular approach to disability may deserve more than critique and dismissal because it poses and answers interesting and important questions about de-othering disability. It suggests ways through which the social understanding of disability has changed over time, not necessarily by means of a foregrounded understanding of rights, as the activist discourse would have it, but by means of a broadened understanding of the right thing to do. Tracing this discourse reveals the

way that this kind of argumentation can be powerfully persuasive in contemporary American culture. Change in the social understanding of disability can rightly come from a variety of sources. What I have argued here is that popular argumentation that promotes assimilation can be one such legitimate way to move beyond the othering of the disabled.

I conclude, then, with a thought experiment based on one of the first times I considered the combination of rights and the right thing to do. When I began this project of analyzing the discourse of disability eight years ago, one of the first articles I noticed in my local newspaper was a short report about a suit brought by the Michigan Center for Independent Living (CIL) against the architectural and construction firms building a minor league baseball stadium in Grand Rapids, a small city in northwest Michigan well-known for its conservatism. The basis of the suit was the lack of handicapped access to the dugouts, and the article described a press conference with a CIL spokesperson who explained this suit exclusively in terms of civil rights law and legal regulations—in other words, in terms of the discourse of disability activism. The report explained that the ADA requires all buildings constructed in whole or in part with federal funds to make all areas accessible; therefore, the dugouts must be accessible. Naturally, the backlash was immediate and predictable. Letters to the editor excoriated those disabled who would propose such a ridiculous expenditure, one that is contrary to common sense (a reaction that would actually make an ideal piece for the *Digest*'s column “Mugged by the Law”). When I read the article, though, I was also exasperated, but for different reasons. Steeped as I am in the everyday experience of assimilated disability, especially of children and adolescents, I could immediately compose numerous arguments for handicapped access to the dugouts. For example, baseball is a Special Olympic sport, so handicapped access to the dugouts would allow this facility to host Special Olympics events; Little League now sponsors several teams for physically impaired players, and handicapped access to the dugouts would allow this facility to host games, playoffs, or even a World Series; it is within the realm of possibility that a manager or coach of a professional baseball team could be or become disabled, and handicapped access to the dugouts would allow the continuation of a productive career; and it is often the case that high school and college students with disabilities who wish to be involved in mainstream sports are members of teams as trainers or statisticians, and these students could work playoff games when high school and college teams play in a large stadium like the one then under construction in Grand Rapids. I can now envision writing an article for the *Reader's Digest* that

would, for example, offer appealing vignettes about Special Olympics players and students who join high school teams; provide persuasive statistics about the ever-increasing numbers of athletes with disabilities; and use judicious praise for architects and builders who follow not just the letter but the spirit of the ADA in design and construction. I can also imagine that such a *Digest* article—with its unstated warrant in assimilation and its implicit argument basing rights on the right thing to do—would be more persuasive to the Grand Rapids public than the CIL lawsuit, and would thereby contribute positively to changes in the social understanding of disability. In other words, I would argue that such an argument moves us beyond othering the disabled and thus is a productive rhetoric through which to do progressive cultural work.²

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Notes

1. Following Linton, I use the terms *disabled*, *disabled people*, and *people with disabilities* interchangeably.

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