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Historicizing Ableism

Susan Burch

Program in American Studies, Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT, USA
Email: sburch@middlebury.edu

Abstract

Recognizing disability as a socially created category, a lived experience with real-world consequences, and part of a critical analytical framework, disability historians have illuminated core aspects of modern American history. With some frequency, however, both scholars and community members conflate disability with ableism. At other times, disability is presented as a category or identity separate from questions of power, privilege, and marginalization. It is common too that scholarly works focused on locating and defining ableism narrow or neglect historical context or specificity. In framing understandings of ableism around disability, many of us have largely ignored how ableism shape-shifts, how it is connected to other systems of power, or how the defining elements of ableism ebb and flow. This article calls on us to focus on the system of power itself—historicizing ableism. Making this move expands who we can write about, what sources we look at, and what purposes our historical work serves.

Recognizing that disability is a socially created category, a lived experience with real world consequences, and part of a critical analytical framework, disability historians have illuminated core aspects of modern American history: citizenship, labor, institutions, kinship, daily life, community, material culture, social movements, health, cultural representation, and science and technology.

Centering disabled people has been a signature feature of our field. Foregrounding our experiences and perspectives counters erasure, marginalization, and misinformation—in the archives, in historical textbooks, and in our everyday interactions with the world around us. Many disability historians, including myself, consider the field capacious in part because the very seed of our work—disability—is contextual, contingent, and contested.[1] In other words, disability is historical in the sense that it is not static, and it reflects the environments in which it appears and is deployed, imagined, and contested. Disability, in all of its manifestations, offers us ways of understanding the past.

As feminist disability activist and scholar Debra Connors wrote in 1985, “Disability is not a medical problem.” But just as importantly, she noted “nor is able-ism just a set of prejudicial

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[1] “The field of disability history is capacious, primarily because ‘disability' itself is difficult to define. Notions of disability change over time and vary from culture to culture,” historians Mike Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim Nielsen explain in the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook on Disability History* (New York, 2018).

ideas about disabled people."[2] In modern American history among other contexts, ableism as a system of power draws on culturally specific beliefs that privilege productivity, efficiency, capacity, self-control, independence, and competency.[3] Particular ideas about time and development become the ableist measure against which all subjects are judged.[4] Hierarchies undergird ableism: human and other beings, societies, and material worlds are judged and ranked based on ableism's values. This system of power manifests in many ways—through policies, social connections, institutions, community development, built-world designs, stereotypes, and violence.

To date, historical studies have mostly centered on *disability*, tracing its significance across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[5] Methodologically, scholarship often centers on physical or mental impairments and the social stigma attached to people judged to have impairments. Colleagues have increasingly looked further back in time, seeking to locate disability in places where the words or values do not neatly align with our current concepts.[6] This motivates us to expand the vocabulary list related to disability and sometimes to stretch the meanings of disability, but our theorization and scholarship usually occurs separately from considerations of ableism.

With some frequency, both scholars and community members have conflated disability with ableism. Sometimes, disability is presented as a category or identity separate from questions of power, privilege, and marginalization. It is common too that scholarly works focused on locating and defining ableism as a system of power often narrow or neglect historical context or specificity. In framing understandings of ableism around disability, many of us have largely

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[2] Debra Connors, "Disability, Sexism, and the Social Order," in *With The Power Of Each Breath: A Disabled Women's Anthology*, eds. Susan E. Brown, Debora Connors, and Nanci Stern (Pittsburgh, 1985), 93. While critical disability studies scholars increasingly theorize ableism as a system, mainstream reference tools like Meriam Webster's dictionary, many Centers for Independent Living, universities, and disability-related organizations still define ableism as "discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities."

[3] Jess L. Wilcox Cowing, "Obesity and (Un)fit Homes: Health and Belonging in a Settler Nation," talk delivered at the American Studies Association Conference, Denver, CO, Nov. 18, 2016; Jess L. Wilcox Cowing, "Settler States of Ability: Assimilation, Incarceration, and Native: Crip Interventions," (College of William and Mary, PhD diss., 2020); Susan Burch, *Committed: Remembering Native Kinship In and Beyond Institutions* (Chapel Hill, 2021); Talila A. Lewis, "2021 working definition of ableism," Jan. 1, 2021, https://www.talilalewis.com/blog/january-2021-working-definition-of-ableism (accessed May 5, 2024).

[4] Historian Caroline Lieffers emphasizes the role of time in her studies of ableism. She also offers the concept of "imperial ableism" as "a collusion of feelings and forces that assessed and identified people, ways of life, and the landscapes with which they were entwined as somehow disabled, and then used a deep intolerance of that disability to justify controlling, correcting, or eliminating them." Lieffers, "Imperial Ableism: Disability and American Expansion, c. 1850-1930," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2020); Caroline Lieffers, "Imperial Mobilities: Disability, Indigeneity, and the United States West, 1850-1920, " in *Global Histories of Disability, 1700-2015*, ed. Esme Cleall (New York, 2023): 93–108. See also Caroline Lieffers, *Blood and Bone: Disability on the Panama Canal,* unpublished manuscript; Caroline Lieffers, "Disability, Spirituality, and Settler Colonialism: The Story of Joseph La Flesche's Artificial Leg," unpublished article (used with permission of author).

[5] Some disability historians illustrate ableist values shaping societies from ancient times to present day. Others emphasize disability's different meanings within specific historical contexts. See for example Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability* (Ann Arbor, 1999); Martha Rose, *The Staff of Oedipus: Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece* (Ann Arbor, 2003); Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking About Physical Impairment in the High Middle Ages, c. 1100–c. 1400* (New York, 2006); Sara Scalenghe, *Disability in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500–1800* (New York, 2014); Jenifer L. Barclay, "Differently Abled: Africanisms, Disability, and Power in the Age of Transatlantic Slavery," in *Bioarchaeology of Impairment and Disability: Theoretical, Ethnohistorical, and Methodological Perspectives,* eds. Jennifer Byrnes and Jennifer Muller (Cham, Switzerland, 2017); Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, *Between Fitness and Death: Disability and Slavery in the Caribbean* (Urbana, IL, 2020); and Wei Yu Wayne Tan, *Blind in Early Modern Japan: Disability, Medicine, and Identity* (Ann Arbor, 2022).

[6] As Americanist Sari Altschuler, pointedly notes, "Disability was not a word defined in eighteenth-century British or American medical dictionaries." Sari Altschuler, "Disability," *Journal of the Early Republic* 43, no. 1 (2023): 122n2.

ignored how ableism shape-shifts, how it is connected to other systems of power, or how the defining elements of ableism ebb and flow.

The ways ableism targeted people across temporal and spatial expanse reflects the changing meaning of these core features, their interaction with other power systems, and specific historical, material, and geographic environments. For example, ableist cultural values of productivity and competency in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America held different meanings, expectations, and outcomes than they do in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (or the Information Age).[7] In early British settler colonial society, religious observance, meeting social duties, and contributing to the work of small family subsistence farms strongly informed ideas of productivity and competency. Family and community connections also played important roles in judging and responding to perceived bodymind difference.[8] At a day-to-day level, this meant that some white Americans who did not or could not read, move quickly, or sustain focus and labor for hours unabated likely were not targeted by ableism because they still conformed to societal standards. At the same time, settler colonists justified land theft, disenfranchisement, and Indigenous erasure based on the belief that Native Americans were inherently incapable of self-determination because they did not exploit their environments "productively."[9] The contrast between how productivity and competency applied to white people and Indigenous people highlights the contextual and contingent nature of ableism's features.

During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, increasing scrutiny—from politicians and reformers, scientists, physicians, social workers, culture producers, and employers—fixated on people who could not meet the evolving expectations of productivity or competency. Deemed unfit, burdensome, or abnormal, many of these targeted populations were institutionalized.[10]

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[7] See for example, Meg E. Roberts, ""Capacity for Labor," Work, and Disability in the Early Republic, 1791–1833," *Journal of the Early Republic* 44, no. 2 (2024): 161–188; Jacob Katz Cogan, "The Look Within: Property, Capacity, and Suffrage in Nineteenth-century America," *Yale Law Journal* 107, no. 2 (Nov. 1997): 473–498; Nicole Belolan, "'Confined to Crutches': James Logan and the Material Culture of Disability in Early America," *Pennsylvania Legacies* Vol. 17, No. 2 (Fall 2017): 6–11; Parnel Wickham, "Idiocy and the Construction of Competence in Colonial Massachusetts," *Children in Colonial America*, ed. James Marten (New York, 2006), 141–154; Laurel Daen, "Creating a User-Inventor Community: How Disabled People Innovated and Marketed Disability in Early Nineteenth-Century America," *Technology and Culture* 65, no. 1 (2024): 117–141; Laurel Daen, "Revolutionary War Invalid Pensions and the Bureaucratic Language of Disability in the Early Republic," *Early American Literature* 52, no. 1 (2017): 141–67; Kim E. Nielsen, "Property, Disability, and the Making of the Incompetent Citizen in the United States, 1880s–1940s," in *Disability Histories,* eds. Susan Burch and Michael Rembis (Champaign, IL, 2014): 308–320; Rabia Belt, "Ballots for Bullets?: Disabled Veterans and the Right to Vote," *Stanford Law Review* 69 (2017): 435–490; Douglas Crandell, *Twenty-Two Cents an Hour: Disability Rights and the Fight to End Subminimum Wages* (Ithaca, 2022); and Sony Coráñez, Bolton, *Crip Colony: Mestizaje, US Imperialism, and the Queer Politics of Disability in the Philippines* (Durham, 2023).

[8] The term "bodymind" intentionally resists simples binaries (i.e., "body vs. mind"), valuing the interdependence of physical and mental processes. For more on the concept of bodymind, see Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor, 2011); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, 2013); Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, 2017); and Samantha Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham, 2018).

[9] Laura Jaffee and Kelsey John, "Disabling Bodies of/and Land: Reframing Disability Justice in Conversation with Indigenous Theory and Activism," *Disability and the Global South* 5, no. 2 (2018): 1407–29; Caroline Lieffers, "Disability in US History," in *Handbook of Disability*, eds. M.H. Rioux, J. Viera, A. Buettgen, E. Zubrow (Singapore, 2022); Lieffers, "Imperial Mobilities," 93–108; Matthew J.C. Cella, "The Bison and the Plow: Eco-Ableism and the Conquest of the Great Plains," in *Disability, the Environment, and Colonialism,* ed. Tatiana Konrad (Philadelphia, 2024), 273–94; Sarah Whitt, Traci Brynne Voyles, and Susan Burch, "Settler Ableism: Indigeneity, Unsettling the Archive, and Accountability in History," in *Cripping the Archive*, eds. Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy and Jenifer Barclay (Urbana, IL, 2025), ch 10.

[10] David J. Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America* (Boston, 1980); Peter McCandless, *Moonlight, Magnolias, and Madness: Insanity in South Carolina from the*

Concurrently, productivity and competency provided the settler state with the legal category of "incompetent Indian," and was a justification for creating Competency Commissions authorized to assess whether or when Native individuals would be permitted to have any control over their allotted land and their everyday lives.[11]

In sum: Ableism is dynamic and adaptable with deep historical roots. This power system emerges, changes, and continues over time-place and has taken different forms, altered its borders, and generated varied material outcomes. It buttresses and is sustained by other interlocking systems and structures, including settler colonialism, racism, xenophobia, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy.

Let us stop using disability as a proxy for ableism and instead focus on the system of power itself—historicizing ableism. Making this move expands who we can write about, what sources we look at, and what purposes our historical work serves.

I experienced this shift firsthand while researching people at the Canton Asylum in South Dakota. A federal psychiatric facility run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and designed specifically to detain Native people, Canton incarcerated upwards of 400 people from dozens of Native nations between 1902 and 1934.[12] Elizabeth Alexis Faribault (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) was one of them. In 1915, amidst tribal conflicts with the BIA and her own altercation with an agent on her reservation, Faribault was forcibly taken from her family and homeland and confined at the Canton Asylum.[13] Eleven years into her detention (in 1926), she gave birth to a daughter, whom she named Cora Winona. In 1928, under very cloudy circumstances, Elizabeth Faribault was found dead on her ward. The superintendent kept Cora, then a toddler, in the locked wards for two more years.[14] Cora Winona ultimately spent her entire childhood and teenage years confined to institutions: Canton Asylum, a Methodist orphanage, a Native American boarding school, and a home for unwed mothers.[15]

Across the archive, administrators' justifications for taking and keeping Elizabeth Faribault and deflecting family challenges to her detention—and also for containing Cora Winona within various institutions—hinged on culturally-specific settler concepts of normality, self-management, and competency. Undergirding these institutions and the policies that sustained them was the belief that Indigenous people were inherently deficient.

But the questions that haunt Cora Winona's daughter Faith O'Neil have never hinged on whether the many diagnoses applied to her grandmother Elizabeth were accurate. O'Neil searches for her grandmother's remains, wonders what happened to her mother within the confines of locked wards and dormitories, and traces the harms imposed on her family in the

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Colonial to the Progressive Eras (Chapel Hill, 1996); Natalie Molina, *Fit to be Citizens?:Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley, 2006); Michael A. Rembis, *Defining Deviance: Sex, Science, and Delinquent Girls, 1890-1960* (Urbana, 2011); Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston, 2013).

[11] See the Burke Act of 1906; Francis Paul Prucha, *Documents of United States Indian Policy* (Lincoln, 2000); Joanne Barker, *Native Acts: Law, Recognition, and Cultural Authenticity* (Durham, 2011); Anne Gregory, "Competency, Allotment, and the Canton Asylum: The Case of a Muscogee Woman," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v41i4.8476 (accessed Nov. 1, 2024); Whitt, Voyles, and Burch, "Settler Ableism."

[12] Pemina Yellow Bird, "Wild Indians: Native Perspectives on the Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians," National Empowerment Center, nd, http://www.power2u.org/downloads/NativePerspectivesPeminaYellowBird.pdf (accessed May 20, 2024); Burch, *Committed*; Sarah Whitt, "'Care and Maintenance': Settler Ableism and Land Dispossession at the Canton Asylum for Insane Indians, 1902–1934," in *Bad Medicine: Settler Colonialism and the Institutionalization of American Indians* (Durham, 2025), 139–183.

[13] Burch, *Committed*; Susan Burch, "Between and Across Institutions: Multiple Removals, Settler Colonialism, and Histories of the West," *The Western Historical Quarterly* (2023): 239–242; Susan Burch, "'Dislocated Histories': The Canton Asylum for Insane Indians," *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 141–162.

[14] Burch, "'Dislocated Histories,'"141–62.

[15] Burch, *Committed.*

name of care and maintenance.[16] O'Neil seeks to trace the effects of the systems and beliefs that led to the institutionalization of her grandmother and mother. The histories of Elizabeth Faribault and Cora Winona are illuminated less through the concept of disability and more through study of the ableist beliefs and policies that so affected their lives.

As the Faribault family taught me, recognizing ableism as a shaping force in history independent of definitions of disability can expand and reform our understanding of historical events and circumstances. Historicizing ableism draws critical attention to pathologization, using the categories of diagnoses to dehumanize and disempower. One of ableism's numerous tools, pathologization targets many groups of people, not only those typically labeled as disabled. Following Elizabeth Faribault's life story *without naming her as disabled* revealed the cross-generational impact of institutionalization. Reading diagnoses as information rather than as truth sparked research beyond institutional and Western medical sources—to interviews, cemeteries, and family scrapbooks. Recognizing pathologization as rationalization, as an instrument serving multiple purposes, shifted authority from asylum employees and bureaucrats to the people most impacted. Grappling with ableism also clarified the many ways Elizabeth Faribault and her kin, as well as others for whom Canton Asylum is family story, struggled, adapted, perished, continued, and are remembered.

Asking "who was targeted and/or impacted by ableism" rather than asking only "who was disabled" significantly expands the possibilities of our historical study. Grandmothers, children, uncles, spouses, and friends of people contained at Canton also experience ableism's force. And so did others in relationship with people detained in colonies for the so-called feebleminded, in rehabilitation centers, Crippled Children Hospitals, sheltered workshops, reformatories, prisons, and detention centers. Interventions in people's lives in the name of productivity, independence, linear development, competency, and self-sufficiency are experienced relationally, not only individually.[17] The answers to "who was targeted by ableism" holds potential to expand our thinking about Canton Asylum, settler colonialism, histories of institutionalization and social control, and modern America more broadly.

Take, for example, eugenics, which has been a defining ideology in modern American and disability histories. Focusing on its racist, xenophobic, homophobic, and misogynist underpinnings, modern American historians have detailed older taproots that fed eugenic ideas and practices as well as eugenics' pervasive reach into the present day.[18] Centering disability in their critiques, various historians have demonstrated how the category of disability became a tool used against many marginalized communities, with dire consequences for people judged to be disabled.[19] Collectively, these scholarly approaches reveal the multivalent impact of biologizing social problems on diverse and overlapping communities.

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[16] Burch, "Between and Across Institutions." Historian Sarah Whitt insightfully critiques Canton Asylum and claims of care and maintenance in "'Care and Maintenance': Indigeneity, Disability and Settler Colonialism at the Canton Asylum for Insane Indians, 1902-1934," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v41i4.8463 (accessed Aug. 11, 2024).

[17] As disability justice worker Talila A. Lewis puts it, "you do not have to be disabled to experience ableism." Lewis, "2021 working definition of ableism." See also Jaffee and John, "Disabling Bodies of/and Land"; and Gregory, "Competency, Allotment, and the Canton Asylum."

[18] Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore, 1995); Nancy Ordover, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (Minneapolis, 2003); Amy L. Fairchild, *Science at the Borders: Immigrant Medical Inspection and the Shaping of the Modern Industrial Labor Force* (Baltimore, 2003); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley, 2015); Elizabeth Catte, *Pure America: Eugenics and the Making of Modern Virginia* (Mt. Pleasant, SC, 2021); Maddalena Marinari, "The 1921 and 1924 Immigration Acts a Century Later: Roots and Long Shadows," *Journal of American History* 109, no. 2 (Sept. 2022): 271–283.

[19] Steven Selden, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America* (New York, 1999); Douglas C. Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Chicago, 2016); Michael Rembis, "Disability and the History of Eugenics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History* (New York, 2018):

Applying a close study of ableism challenges us to extend our critical gaze beyond disability as a category separate from other social identity categories and to avoid the pitfalls of ranking disability in relation to other social categories (i.e., disability *vs.* race; disability *vs.* gender and social class, etc.) in order to explain eugenics' toll. We can trace ways that ableism buttressed White supremacy to justify selective immigration restrictions of people deemed undesirable and deficient, as with the 1924 Immigration Act (Johnson–Reed Act), which blocked or limited Asian and Southern and Eastern European immigrants but admitted British citizens and Western Europeans.[20] Ableism interlocked with the system of gender and sexual roles and expectations, fueling the pathologization and institutionalization of gender nonconforming people in psychiatric facilities, colonies for the so-called feebleminded, and reformatories.[21] Ableism and racism also have fed one another: Advocates of Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924, as just one example, leveraged ableist threats of degeneration and concepts of inherent worthiness based on self-control, productivity, and competency alongside racist beliefs of white racial purity as the highest form of humanity.[22]

We can expand our understanding of the Supreme Court's landmark *Buck v. Bell* ruling, which has drawn significant attention from modern American and disability historians, when we consider ableism rather than strictly disability. The 1927 case involved Carrie Buck, a young white woman born into poverty in Charlottesville, Virginia and raised by a single parent. In 1920, her mother, Emma, was arrested for alleged sex work and then confined at the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded in Lynchburg. While living with a foster family, Carrie Buck was raped by one of their relatives. Doctors and community members interpreted Carrie Buck's pregnancy from the assault as evidence that she was feebleminded. Observers at the time assumed without question that Carrie Buck's infant daughter, Vivian, must be feebleminded as well. As with her mother Emma, Carrie Buck was involuntarily committed to the Virginia colony. During her detention, Carrie Buck became the test case for Virginia's forced sterilization law, which ultimately came before the Supreme Court. In the 8-1 decision of *Buck v. Bell,* the justices upheld the constitutionality of sterilizing individuals with cognitive or psychiatric disabilities confined in state funded institutions.[23]

Critiques by numerous modern Americanists and disability historians have centered on whether Carrie Buck's diagnosis of feeblemindedness was accurate.[24] Most conclude that the

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85–104. Disability studies scholar Jess Whatcott also offers a disability-centered approach in their work, *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics* (Durham, 2024).

[20] *Immigration Act of 1924, Public Law No. 68–139;* Roxana Galusca, "From Fictive Ability to National Identity: Disability, Medical Inspection, and Public Health Regulations on Ellis Island," *Cultural Critique* no. 72 (2009): 137–63.

[21] Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton, 1996); Margaret Gibson, "The Masculine Degenerate: American Doctors' Portrayals of the Lesbian Intellect, 1880–1949," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no. 4 (1998): 78–103; Wendy Anne Kline, *"Building a Better Race": Eugenics and the Making of Modern Morality in America, 1900–1960* (Berkeley, 2001); Ordover, *American Eugenics*; Ryan Lee Cartwright, "Sissies, Loafers, and the Feebleminded: Disability and Nonheteronormativity in Rural White Eugenic Family Studies," *GLQ* 28, no. 4 (2022): 515–540.

[22] J. Douglas Smith, "The Campaign for Racial Purity and the Erosion of Paternalism in Virginia, 1922-1930: 'Nominally White, Biologically Mixed, and Legally Negro,'" *The Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 1 (2002): 65–106; Gregory Michael Dorr, "Assuring America's Place in the Sun: Ivey Foreman Lewis and the Teaching of Eugenics at the University of Virginia, 1915–1953," *The Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 2 (2000): 257–96; J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 2002); Gregory Michael Dorr, "Defective or Disabled?: Race, Medicine, and Eugenics in Progressive Era Virginia and Alabama," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5, no. 4 (2006): 359–92; Jamelia Morgan, "On the Relationship Between Race and Disability," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 58 (2023): 663–729.

[23] Susan Burch and Lindsey Patterson, "Not Just Any Body: Disability, Gender, and History," *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 122–137. *Buck v. Bell* has never been overturned.

[24] See for example Paul Lombardo, "Misdiagnosis of Carrie Buck," Cold Springs Harbor Laboratory DNA Learning Center, https://dnalc.cshl.edu/view/15210-Misdiagnosis-of-Carrie-Buck-Paul-Lombardo.html (accessed Dec. 11, 2024); Paul Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell* (Baltimore, 2010); Edward J. Larson, "Putting Buck v. Bell in Scientific and Historical Context," *Pepperdine Law*

particular case of *Buck v. Bell* was unjust because Carrie Buck was not actually feebleminded. This misses the larger point that close consideration of ableism reveals: Carrie Buck as well as her mother, sister, and daughter were all targeted under ableist beliefs and policies. Stigma, dismantling the family, institutionalization, sterilization, and continued segregation are among the constellation of ableist, unjust interventions they experienced. The tens of thousands of other Americans forcibly sterilized across the twentieth century—and the many more involuntarily warehoused in institutions—were also targeted by ableism alongside other systems of power. The material consequences are not simply histories of disability; they are histories of ableism.

In this context, historical critiques of eugenicists' fixation on defectiveness and deficiency need not depend so heavily on the category of disability. These descriptors, often associated especially with disabled people, are not only applied to people identified as disabled. The capacious, ableist categories of *defective* and *deficient* have indiscreet borders by design, making them particularly effective instruments to dehumanize wide-ranging (and sometimes overlapping) groups of people.[25] Rather than reduce *defective* and *deficient* to mere synonyms for disability, engaging with ableism in conjunction with other power systems may open more space to explore the many layers of each concept.

Critiquing eugenics with ableism in mind, for instance, counters the tendency to define ableism *as* eugenics. Put more directly: Ableism, interlocking with other systems of oppression, spawned eugenics.

Likewise, the historicization of ableism likely will yield more specificity about disability and the relationship between the two. A close critique reveals that disability is a manifestation of this system of power. Understanding this enlarges the scope of histories of ableism and histories of disability and encourages more reckoning with people's relationship to bodymind difference.

These ideas and re-centering invite many questions, including: Are there signature features of ableism that we have not recognized? What are the fundamental columns upholding this system in addition to medicine, law, and religion? How else does ableism interact with other systems in modern American historical events and themes? Does ableism exist outside of imperial, colonial, and/or settler colonial contexts? How might we redirect our attention beyond human subjects, inviting each other to think about land, air, water, and other-than-human animals in relationship to ableism?[26] What can we learn about modern America—and other histories—by further exploring ableism as a historical force?

Susan Burch is professor of American studies at Middlebury (Vermont, United States). Her research and teaching interests focus on histories of deaf, disability, Mad, race, ethnicity, Indigeneity, and gender and sexuality. She is the author of *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to 1942*, and a coauthor, with Hannah Joyner, of *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson*. Her coedited anthologies include *Women and Deafness: Double Visions, Deaf and Disability Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, and Disability Histories*. She also served as editor-in-chief of *The Encyclopedia of American Disability History*. Her most recent work, *Committed: Remembering Native Kinship In and Beyond Institutions*, centers on peoples' experiences inside and outside the Canton Asylum, a federal psychiatric institution created to detain American Indians.

Review 39, no. 1 (2011); Adam Cohen, *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck* (New York, 2017).

[25] Jay Dolmage, "Disabled Upon Arrival: the Rhetorical Construction of Disability and Race at Ellis Island," *Cultural Critique*, no. 77 (2011): 24–69.

[26] Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York, 2017); Jaffee and John, "Disabling Bodies of/and Land"; Jess L. Wilcox Cowing, "Occupied Land is an Access Issue: Interventions in Feminist Disability Studies and Narratives of Indigenous Activism," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 17, no. 17 (2020): 9–25; Caroline Lieffers, In'aska (Dennis Hastings), and Margery Coffey, "Inseparable: Lands and Peoples in Sacred Connection," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2021), https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/8462/6295 (accessed Feb. 10, 2024); Sunaura Taylor, *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert* (Berkeley, 2024).