(Re)Considering American Eugenics

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This special issue provides windows into American pasts and presents, formed, informed, and transformed by eugenics. Eugenics travels in historiographies of the United States under many names: a movement, an era, a pseudoscience, an ideology, a nativist agenda, an extremist doctrine. The website of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, a New York-based genetic research facility that between 1910 and 1939 operated as the Eugenics Record Office’s base (see Allen), to this day presents eugenics as a “well-intentioned but tragically misinformed science.” This volume aims to approach eugenics as a “paradigmatic modern American discourse” (English 2) that is to a considerable degree coextensive with modernity itself and that extends from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. In Foucauldian terminology, eugenics constitutes not merely an ideological discourse, but an episteme—a thought and knowledge system—characteristic of North American and other modernities. The authors of this volume regard an understanding of eugenics as important to American Studies scholarship as a whole, and specifically an understanding that extends beyond the acknowledgment of the “moral detour” (Singleton) that some scholars have argued. We aim at reconsidering American Eugenics as a broad cultural force, palpable in popular and literary culture, informing everyday discourse and common sense as well as modernist aesthetics and technological discourse. To the study of American modernities and their fractured, uneven legacies and continuities, eugenics provides an essential but frequently neglected framework. More often than not, its investigation forces scholars of North America to reconsider standard aspects of nineteenth- and twentieth-century history, a perspectival gesture that the interdisciplinary contributions to this special issue—incorporating History of Science, Popular Culture Studies, Literary Studies, and Urban Studies—all perform. This volume provides scholarly resources, historical material, epistemological tools, and teachable moments to enable the necessary and large-scaled reframing of American culture and history in the light of the biopolitical project called eugenics.
What was/is eugenics? Eminent Disability Studies scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder gave a precise definition exactly 15 years ago: “[...] eugenics is the hegemonic formation of exclusionary practices based on scientific formulas of deviancy” (Eugenic Atlantic 849). Eugenics unfolds the discriminatory meanings of race, class, disability, gender, and sexuality, and enacts their relentless synthetization into a complex and enduring project of human segregation. Presenting a rigidly organized and widespread apparatus of knowledges, classificatory systems, and epistemologies for the devaluation of life, eugenics was orchestrated by nationalist policy, nativist legislation, necropolitical medical practices such as sterilization, and dedicated research institutions. Around 1900, eugenics was at work globally, leading to the emergence of a transatlantic knowledge industry—Mitchell and Snyder aptly call this the “Eugenic Atlantic”—that generated countless international academic conferences, academic appointments, and dedicated departments at more than 80 universities in the United States alone. Its academic protagonists were considered field-leading in a variety of disciplines—Statistics, Sexology, Anthropology, Immigration Policy, Sociology, Clinical Psychology, etc.—and maintained close ties to their colleagues in Europe (Kuhl; Adams) and South America (Stepan). Eugenic discourse worked as a catalyst for scientific knowledges in the late nineteenth century and constituted a major hub for transatlantic and international connections, both scientific and policy-based (Bashford and Levine; Williamson). This eugenic episteme was buoyed by a broad social and cultural climate of acceptance and endorsement that steadily increased from the 1880s onwards, until its popular climax in the 1930s and 1940s (Currell and Cogdell; Kevles).

Francis Galton, who coined the term in his Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development (1883), phrased eugenics’ meaning in a way that signals the progressive and humanitarian attitude associated with the term in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: “[...] eugenics is the science of improving the human stock through selective breeding” (89). Galton propagated his science as a desirable, even utopian, ‘civil religion’ that would shape modern societies. His goal, declared in front of luminaries of London’s scientific community in 1904, was to promote “the general intellectual acceptance of eugenics as a hopeful and most important study” and to “let its principles work into the heart of the nation” (Galton, “Eugenics” 17). A more pragmatist and somewhat futuristic definition—“eugenics is the self-direction of human evolution”—was adopted by the American Eugenics Society as their motto in 1926. Both slogans reflect how eugenic ideas carried an appeal characteristic of modernity, when Western nations, under the impact of immigration, technological progress, industrialization, and capitalism, increasingly focused on the composition of populations to distill nation-
al identity (Levine and Bashford; Ordover; Stern). Managing the well-being and futurity of the nation-state meant surveilling and controlling the racial integrity and (re)productivity of populations (Macey). The modern nation-state depended on eugenic science to formulate social coherence and progress and to establish tools and vocabularies to manage, control, and organize the selective reproduction of its citizens and the improvement of its population (Kline). Eugenics is the large-scale modern biopolitical project aiming to shape society, nation, progress, and populations in one overarching scientific and social intervention, both bio- and necropolitical. It articulates the scene of a genetic Anthropocene, in which man is posited as a genetic force with global reach, called upon to “secur[e] that humanity shall be represented by the fittest races” (Galton, “Eugenics” 4).

“More of these and less of these”

Eugenics relied on the quasi-scientific theory that people’s traits were subject to hereditary transmission and consequently could be ‘bred out’ or amplified by selective reproduction. This vulgarized version of Mendel’s theory of heredity resulted in a rigid stratification of populations into the desirable ‘fit’ and the undesirable ‘unfit.’ An educational billboard, part of a traveling eugenics exhibit in the 1920s, framed this dichotomy in simple, almost vernacular terms: “America needs more of these and less of these” (Figure 1): more of genetically excellent ‘future leaders’; less of those ‘burdening’ American society with immorality and unproductivity.

The traits of interest to eugenic researchers and proponents of selection inevitably addressed race and especially racial purity, health and disabilities (then labeled as ‘defects’ and ‘deficiencies’), intelligence,
criminal behavior, morality, and (hetero)sexual comportment. Building on a vernacular understanding of early genetics, eugenics as a system of thought and classification was broadly applicable and easily communicated, and seized on popular attitudes towards reproduction, race, immigration, poverty, disability, and citizenship. Eugenic theories shaped immigration legislation (Baynton, *Defectives*; Ngai), social and economic programs and policy (Leonard), medical institutions (Dowbiggin; Ludmerer; Thomson), and the self-conduct of populations (Kline), all subject to the rigid biopolitical bifurcation between ‘desirables’ and ‘undesirables.’

A central operating term under which eugenics organized exclusion from desirable status was “feeblemindedness” (Trent; Noll and Trent), a loose denomination of unfitness and ‘genetic failure’ applied to a diverse array of bodies: epileptics, the poor, people with mental, developmental, and physical disabilities, various ethnicities, homosexuals, single ‘wayward’ women, etc. (Baynton, “These pushful days”; Block). ‘Feeblemindedness’ corralled a variety of social, physical, and economic deviations under one umbrella term, and separated them from an idealized white, able-bodied “normalcy” (Davis).

The features rubriced under ‘feeblemindedness’ were linked as being genetically related: e.g., people of color, whether immigrant or native-born, were more likely to be deemed ‘feebleminded’ (Mitchell and Snyder, eds., *Cultural Locations*). Tethering various forms of non-normativity together, and further linking them to the idea of hereditary transmissibility, transported a sense of escalating deviation emanating from variously ‘othered’ bodies: as early as 1896, a study reported that not only was ‘feeblemindedness’ genetically transmitted, but that ‘abnormalities’ such as blindness or deaf-mutism were found to be several times as frequent in families in which ‘feeblemindedness’ was prevalent (see Baynton, “These pushful days” 56). Such findings were further linked to racial purity, economic well-being, and productivity. Though composed of very distinct subcategories, ‘feeblemindedness’ allowed for the grouping of variously categorized bodies and the blending of these groups into one another to establish an inferior population that posed a swelling genetic and demographic threat to white, able-bodied, and heterosexual middle-class normalcy (Carter). To encourage the reproductive growth of the latter and curb the numbers of the former, eugenics materialized in vastly different registers, which scholarship has frequently described as ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ eugenics.

**Positive Eugenics / Racial Governmentality**

Positive eugenics were communicated through welfare politics, sexual education of women and girls (Rembis), discourses of physical ability, health and hygiene (Lippmann; Pernick, “Eugenics and Public Health”), and racial distinction. Desirable populations were to absorb
eugenic principles of careful sexual selection and obtain a ‘genetic literacy’: individuals needed to situate themselves within personal hereditary legacies (expressed in so-called “pedigree charts”; see Lombardo; Stillwell; also Reyes in this issue) and a genetic landscape of diverse populations posing varying degrees of risk to white and able-bodied integrity, embodied in the so-called “Normman”-statue (Stephens and Cryle). Already in the aftermath of the Civil War, before the term eugenics itself was in currency, white American women learned to translate the threats posed by immigration, miscegenation, and class mobility into programs of proper reproductive self-conduct (Seitler; Strick 51-92). Pregnancy advice, distributed in pamphlets and books such as J. H. Dye’s Painless Childbirth (1882), bolstered racial and class dominance by encouraging ‘racial betterment,’ a privatized eugenic politics of marriage and reproduction articulating a sense of ‘breeding’:

We should seek in marriage to neutralize […] the morbid hereditary elements which may be found in husband and wife. […] We should seek to oppose the debility of one parent by the strong constitution of the other. […] Among the lower animals the most studious care is taken to breed only from the very best quality of the stock; quantity is sacrificed to quality; and is the welfare of the human race of any less importance? (28)

Wendy Kline describes this early scripting of ‘eugenic duty’ leveraged at white and middle-class populations as a “reproductive morality” (7-31) that addressed white women as purveyors of the racial national project that emerged after 1865, now reimagined in the terminology of genetics and heredity. The early formations of this governmental script to eugenic self-conduct germinated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century into broadly applicable tropes of reproductively responsible femininity, which can be traced from early feminist writing by Victoria Woodhull or Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Seitler) to 1940s popular culture. As an example, Kate Chopin’s little-known short story “Mrs. Mobry’s Reason” (1893) dramatizes the same genetic taint of hereditary madness as the 1932 movie A Bill of Divorcement (George Cukor), starring Katharine Hepburn. In both instances, the modern woman is defined by how she aligns her reproductive desires with eugenic responsibility: while Mrs. Mobry ends tragically as her daughter is ‘enfeebled’ by an ignored hereditary strain, Hepburn’s character, realizing her father’s disposition to insanity, refuses to reproduce altogether (see Ooten and Trembanis).

Matching such middle-class narrations of female reproductive responsibility, around 1900 a predominantly masculine health discourse emerged, which not only foregrounded the responsible white husband and father producing eugenically proper offspring but articulated the health-norms of the male body in unprecedented ways (Heinemann; Nagel). Olaf Stieglitz’s contribution to this special issue on “Bernarr Macfadden’s Physical Culture-World” reveals how the discursive logics
of early fitness culture, striving to improve the health and well-being of the masses, intertwined with the rigid bifurcations of the eugenic project and effectively popularized its principles. Bernarr Macfadden’s motto “weakness is a crime—don’t be criminal!” framed physical fitness as a matter of civic and moral duty, but moreover iterated the pathologizing entanglement of bodily features, criminal behavior, disability, and poverty that criminologist Cesare Lombroso’s Criminal Man (L’uomo delinquente, 1876) had concocted to link social deviance to biological, physiological, and racial registers. Macfadden’s “ultimate eugenic American family” (Stieglitz in this volume), optimized by physical culture and scientific guidance and featuring no less than seven exemplarily fit white children, represented the popular epitome of a eugenic sensibility that had spread over the country through countless traveling exhibits (Rydell), advice columns and lectures (Ladd-Taylor, “Saving”), and so-called “fitter families and better baby contests” (Selden), popular with many Americans throughout the early twentieth century. Macfadden, and the legions of popular experts and role-models on ‘genetic health’ and ‘eugenic fitness’ like him vying for public attention in the 1910s-1940s, provided masses of Americans with scripts to understand their lives, bodies, and choices within the framework of eugenics.

As Daylanne English argues, the prospect of social advancement via a eugenically inflected politics of reproduction appealed not only to whites, but to middle-class aspirants in general. In her reading of the “prize baby contests” (49-56) that W. E. B. Du Bois published during his editorship of The Crisis, she argues that to “think eugenically” was at times highly compatible to Du Bois’s notions of racial uplift and African American agency. She quotes a 1922 article by Du Bois: “[t]he Negro has not been breeding for an object [therefore, he must begin to] train and breed for brains, for efficiency, for beauty” (38). In the heyday of eugenics, the racial betterment enacted through birth control and ‘breeding logistics’ were therefore not necessarily understood as the ‘white supremacist project,’ as envisioned for example in Lothrop Stoddard’s The Rising Tide of Color (1912), but had currency within a larger and progressive project of racial uplift.

Mollie Ladd-Taylor in this sense rightly stresses the “ordinariness” (“Eugenics” 299) of many aspects of eugenics. Its positive, biopolitical formulations saturated many cultural spheres apart from physical culture and reproductive conduct, and have been traced by scholars specifically in theater (Wolff), photography (Maxwell), modernist design (Cogdell), various genres of cinematic production (A. Smith, Hideous; Pernick, The Black Stork), and popular comics (Soper). Literary modernism in particular functioned as a crucial field for the reformulation of national meanings into eugenic narratives, as stressed by Daylanne English in her book Unnatural Selections (2004), as well as by Lois Cuddy and Claire Roche in their comprehensive volume Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature (2012). For example, many futuristic novels
from around 1900 suggest eugenics as a utopian measure for social bet-
terment and American progress (Parrinder), in what we can, with Sara
Ahmed’s helpful term, call a “progressive racism.” Classics such as Wil-
liam Dean Howell’s A Traveler from Altruria (1894), Edward Bellamy’s
Looking Backward (1892), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herland (1915)
all envision exclusively white utopias where social problems, like pov-
erty and crime, have been eradicated through selective reproduction,
and the application of eugenic principles has produced healthy, peaceful,
and economically just utopian societies. Gilman, for example, refers to
“gentle breeding, in order to cultivate a higher level of intelligence, more
sturdy children, smooth and happy lives, and do away with degenerates
and the abnormal” (qtd. in Garland-Thomson, “Welcoming” 81). Realist
novels—from Frank Norris’s McTeague (1899) to Erskine Caldwell’s To-
bacco Road (1932)—further explored the connections between heredity,
degeneracy, poverty, and crime. Although they stop short of articulating
an exterminatory logic, these texts nevertheless explicate in clear terms
the social threats and imminent dangers presented by the ‘dysgenic
strains’ of the nation.

Negative Eugenics / Segregationist Necropolitics

“We as a people are awakening to a better realization of the fact that
from the standpoint of the taxpayer, if from no other, it is good business
policy to seek out the causes of human waste and stem the tide of de-
generacy” (Kirkbridge 1838). This quote from Franklin Kirkbridge’s 1912
pamphlet “The Right to Be Well-Born” illustrates how the idea of ‘social
improvement as genetic improvement’ was easily linked to a logic of
extermination and exclusion in the minds of modern Americans. Com-
plimentary to positive prescriptive measures, negative eugenics devised
methods to ‘stem the tides’ of degeneracy, racialization, or poverty that
were envisioned not only by proponents of eugenics like Henry Goddard
and nativists like Madison Grant but also by reformers like anthropolo-
gist Franz Boas. Frequently justified by economic rationales, negative
eugenics comprised an array of measures to limit the reproduction of
one or several groups, marked by racial inferiority, social deviance, and
the all-purpose dismissal of ‘feeblemindedness.’ Immigration restric-
tion, prohibition of interracial marriages or sexual relations between
the disabled, forced sterilization and abortion, the segregation of people
with disabilities into asylums, and the deliberate starvation of infants
(Asch and Fine 58) were all measures employed and rationalized within
the eugenic project.

Between 1900 and 1940, methods to preempt the multiplication of
the ‘unfit’ were so uncontroversial that even critics of racist and na-
tivist policies agreed to the necessity to act on ‘dysgenic’ tendencies,
described by prominent eugenicist Charles Davenport as an ever-es-
calating force: “[...] defective conditions are inevitably transmitted in
the germ plasm and are apparently being reproduced many times faster than the more normal characteristics” (qtd. in Baynton, “These pushful days” 56). The resulting image of ‘inferior types reproducing at superior rates’ provided national urgency to eugenic doctrines, which argued their legitimacy by stressing ‘normalcy’s’ demographic disadvantage and the economic burden that increasing numbers of ‘undesirables’ put on the nation and on themselves. Even progressive and outspoken anti-racist figures like Boas therefore agreed on negative eugenics, while remaining critical about selective reproduction’s ability to improve the quality of populations: “[t]he attempt to suppress those defective classes whose deficiencies can be proved by rigid methods to be due to hereditary causes, and to prevent unions that will unavoidably lead to the birth of disease-stricken progeny, is the proper field of eugenics” (Boas 478). Though he attacked the genetic engineering of positive eugenics as a “laughable idea” (478), Boas regarded the overall ‘unburdening’ of society by restricting reproduction of ‘inferior types’ as economically and nationally necessary. What was known as the ‘menace of the feebleminded’ provided a universally accepted antagonism to notions of American progress and modernity, escalated by arguments of demographic and economic urgency. Early in the century, institutions like the Immigration Restriction League framed immigration within the terminology of genetics, racial purity, and the threat of contamination. Its founder, Prescott Hall, wrote in 1912 that

immigration restriction is a species of segregation on a large scale, by which inferior stock can be prevented from both diluting and supplanting good stocks. A policy of national eugenics for the United States means the prevention of the breeding of the unfit native, and also means, in addition, the prevention of the immigration of the unfit alien. (qtd. in Tichenor 144)

Persons deemed unfit or inferior, either by virtue of their racial status, national origin, or class belonging, were remade as contagions that threatened to contaminate the racial integrity of the nation. Intellectual disability and mental illness provided the terminologies through which foreign bodies were conceptualized not only as alien or racially other, but as corrupting, contaminating, and infecting agents. The Immigration Act of 1917, for example, excluded individuals from entry based on countless criteria, a small sample of which is quoted here:

[…] idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, epileptics […] persons who have had one or more attacks of insanity at any time previously; persons of constitutional psychopathic inferiority; persons with chronic alcoholism; paupers, […] vagrants; persons [of] moral turpitude; polygamists […] anarchists […] prostitutes […]. (United States, Congress 875)

Eugenic science operationalized all of these vaguely determined traits as hereditary and thus certain to carry over to potential American children. The immigrant, singled out by her national origin, class status, skin color, and degree of defectiveness, not only threatened to corrupt
the national gene pool, but by extension to send the whole progressive
nation onto a trajectory of degeneration.

Jay Dolmage, in his influential article “Disabled Upon Arrival: The
Rhetorical Construction of Disability and Race at Ellis Island,” and
Mae Ngai, in her work on immigration legislation, have both traced
how eugenics and its attendant intermixing of racism and ableism
shaped the nation’s attitude to newcomers from abroad. Beginning with
the Page Law of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and culmi-
nating in the wide-reaching Immigration Act of 1924, eugenic thinking
reframed immigration policy as an issue of global racial segregation. As
Dolmage unfolds, the above cited criteria—articulating social, mental,
and physical deviations—became routine labels immigration officers
used to describe various ethnicities seeking entry, and minute charts
listed the occurrence of these deficiencies in Russian, Italian, and Jew-
ish migrants. These racist and ableist practices effectively “turned entry
into the U.S. into a passage partially defined by a medical vocabulary
and pathology of health” (Markel and Stern 1315). The doctrines of this
“new racism” (Dolmage) materialized in an official handbook on racial
profiling used by the U.S. government—the Immigration Commission’s
Dictionary of Races or Peoples (1911)—and were supplemented by a wide
range of other reports, mainly authored by commission chief William
Dillingham, including Immigrants as Charity Seekers, Immigration and
Crime, and Immigration and Insanity (all 1911).

While racialized immigration practices sought to protect American
purity at the borders, compulsory sterilization and institutionaliza-
tion actualized eugenic principles at home (Cohen; Hansen and King).
Ladd-Taylor estimates that 63,000 people, mainly but not exclusively
women, were forcibly sterilized in the United States up to the 1970s
(Fixing 3), with Indiana being the first state to adopt sterilization laws
in 1907 (Reilly). By January 1935, 25 states had passed similar bills, some
of which remain unrepealed today (Kluchin). In her wide-ranging con-
tribution to this issue, Amanda Reyes explores the under-taught case
of 21-year-old Carrie Buck, a woman diagnosed as “feebleminded” and
sterilized under Virginia’s so-called Racial Integrity Act. Through a deep
historical reading of the eugenic technologies and discourses leading
up to this case, Reyes argues for a visual logic inherent in eugenic dis-
course, as exemplified by the physiognomies, charts, and graphs that
also were used in Carrie Buck’s court case. Reyes develops the genealogy
of this ‘eugenic visuality’ from the photographic composites of Galton to
Herrnstein and Murray’s notorious The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class
Structure in American Life (1994), a book which revitalized the racialized
discourse around intelligence levels that eugenicists shaped in the 1910s.
Her analysis links a deep history-of-science reading to a deft critique of
neoliberal racism and demonstrates exemplarily how productive scholar-
ly attention to the eugenic entanglement of intelligence, ability, and
race proves.
The Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of sterilizing the ‘unfit’ in the famous 1927 case *Buck v. Bell*, with judge Oliver Wendell Holmes’s infamous words “three generations of imbeciles are enough” articulating the necessity of a medicalized necropolitics “for her welfare and that of society” (O.W. Holmes, *Buck v. Bell*). Medical officials constructed ‘feebleminded’ individuals as sexually excessive and productively monstrous, and at the same time as helpless victims of their own ‘backwardness’; sterilization and the large-scale removal of people with disabilities into closed institutions in this way were legitimazed as beneficial both to the nation and the ‘undesirables.’

The proliferating institutionalization and segregation of people with disabilities into state homes and asylums followed much the same biopolitical logic: beginning with the opening of *Eastern State Hospital* in Williamsburg, Virginia (1773; see Wickham) and Samuel Howe’s proposition for an “idiot asylum” for Massachusetts in 1848, a plethora of institutions and so-called ‘colonies’ designated to ‘care’ for pathologized individuals appeared throughout the country (Radford; Trent). With the American publication of French physician Édouard Séguin’s book *Idiocy and Its Treatment by the Physiological Method* (1866), these institutions took on the philanthropic guise of rehabilitative and educational facilities. While working to assess their inhabitants for resocialization, asylums and institutions—such as the Pennsylvania Training School headed by psychiatrist Martin Barr—also acted as de facto research institutions on heredity, forms of mental disabilities, and methods of medical treatment such as sterilization. As Matthew Thomson stresses, this program changed under the impact of eugenics to prioritizing containment:

[a] belief in the eugenic danger of the mentally defective became widespread […] the colony-style institution seemed to offer the ideal solution: safely segregated, economical, expandable, and modern. This helped make segregation the first and foremost eugenic policy of the day. (118)

Apart from the wide-ranging abuse, maltreatment, and isolation of various people—poor, disabled, ‘immoral,’ etc.—happening between 1860 and at least 1950 (Brantlinger), the eugenic segregation of the ‘unfit’ also worked clandestinely: Selma Bidlingmaier’s highly original contribution to this volume traces the eugenic undergirding of New York City’s housing and tenement policies around 1900. She demonstrates how the eugenic imaginary of a dysgenic mass of people, whose relentless reproduction burdened the nation, informed city planning, administrative language, and the uneven distribution of living space during the period of the city’s most rapid expansion. Architects, city planners, sociologists, and politicians joined forces, conjuring dangerous dysgenic influences that emanated from the poor and immigrant parts of the citizenry, and devised a material counterstrategy of architectural segregation that Bidlingmaier deftly terms ‘urban eugenics.’ Her article articulates a
materialized ideology of segregating the ‘fit’ and the ‘unfit,’ palpable in the grids and layouts of buildings and districts. Complementing Susan Schweik’s exemplary book The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public (2009) on the exclusion of people with disabilities from the urban public’s visual scene, Bidlingmaier also establishes a eugenic prefiguration of the problem of architectural and environmental segregation that scholars have uncovered, e.g., in the work of city official Robert Moses, who was instrumental in shaping the crass racial spatialities of postwar New York (Sze; Freilla).

**Eugenic Epistemologies: Race and Disability**

In addition to legislative, institutional, and material histories, this volume also assesses and explicates the epistemological legacies of the eugenic era. As alluded to in the above examples, eugenic thought and practice rendered the central categories that we use in American Cultural Studies—race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability—relentlessly contaminated and ambiguously constituted, as Amanda Reyes’s contribution in particular demonstrates. Eugenics marks an epistemological shift in human categorization that relentlessly mixed, blurred, and realigned these categories, effectively making them dynamic and frequently indistinguishable, in order to construct certain populations as fit to reproduce and others as given to death and/or isolation (Samuels 111-16). Eugenics (re)assembles, for example, the categories of race and disability into operative mechanisms that delineate people as populations marked by deviance or normalcy and thus capable of producing national futurity or slipping into regression.

The central question of the eugenic project—“who should and who should not inhabit the world” (Hubbard)—radically realigned and repurposed categories for human de- and evaluation into dynamic vectors, assemblages, and clusters, so that speaking in isolation of ‘race’ or ‘disability’ is hardly feasible after (re)considering eugenics (Annamma et al.; Erevelles and Minear). To understand this dynamization and entanglement enacted by eugenic thought, a consideration of the scientific construction of cognitive disability in the nineteenth century is useful.

In 1866, physician John Langdon Down’s article “Observation on the Ethnic Classification of Idiots” did not only invent the diagnosis that is familiar to us as Down syndrome. It also grouped different types of patients, understood then as “idiots,” along racial lines: Caucasian, Malay, Ethiopian, and American, with Down’s special focus on the cluster he termed “mongols”: “[a] very large number of congenital idiots are typical Mongols. So marked is this, that when placed side by side, it is difficult to believe that the specimens compared are not children of the same parents” (260). Down’s invention of what he himself termed ‘mongolism’ deployed the phenomenology and terminology of race in order to think, describe, and classify disability. ‘Mongolism’ for Down
transformed racial belonging into a dynamic position that could change from parents to children, a vector of hereditary degeneracy he dubbed ‘retrogression’—a virtual flight down the racial hierarchies that Johann Blumenbach had devised in the late eighteenth century.

As Down’s ‘mongolism’ laminated intellectual disability and racial difference together (Chen), it also manifested the always-possible ‘regression’ of the white subject into non-whiteness, by virtue of disability. While scientific racism since 1700 had relentlessly posited the racialized body’s nearness to notions of intellectual inferiority and ‘weak will,’ thus providing scientific legitimacy to enslavement and regimes of white control (Erevelles 25-64), Down’s theory indicates a dynamization of the race / disability nexus in the second half of the nineteenth century. As intellectual disability or ‘feeblemindedness’ could render racial denominations unfixed, permeable, and slippery, the contemporary descriptions of the poor, the disabled, the migratory, and the otherwise socially deviant took on racialized shadings. Anna Stubblefield as well as Nicole Rafter have demonstrated how both criminality and intellectual disability could render white subjects as ‘racially’ corrupted and corrupting— notions these scholars translate into “tainted whiteness” (Stubblefield) and “white others” (Rafter, “The Criminalization” 234)—thus engendering new dysgenic threats, from the hordes of “white trash” (Rafter, White Trash), unearthed by eugenic family studies like Goddard’s The Kallikak Family (1912), to the ‘criminal freaks’ populating mass-produced crime comics from 1910 onwards (Soper).

The racial ‘tainting’ of white bodies marked by disability is also again expressed in the case of Carrie Buck, whose sterilization was justified, according to the court-submitted evaluation, by her lack of “power of control […] all her instincts and appetites are in the direction that would lead to vice” (qtd. in Block 248). The disabled body’s sexual excess was modeled on notions of racialized hypersexuality and was not restricted to female bodies. Sexual predation becomes a standard trope of modernist depictions of intellectually disabled men. William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury (1929) and John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men (1937) are canonical works that feature disabled men, and both are regarded as sexual predators and punished for their transgressions: Faulkner’s Benji is castrated for allegedly molesting a girl, and a lynch mob pursues Steinbeck’s simpleminded farmhand Lennie for touching and accidentally murdering the overseer’s wife.

Such literary instances of sexualized violence—situated in what Vincent Benlloch calls “eugenically constituted [and] racially evocative” texts (90)—render sterilization and racial lynching as parallel phenomena linked to the necropolitical dimension of eugenics, as Michelle Jarman argues in her instructive comparison of Faulkner and Zora Neale Hurston’s Seraph on the Suwanee (1948). The deviant body—Black and/or disabled—is imagined as a threat to white purity and national integrity. Lynching and sterilization practices pathologized their victims with the
same rationale of pathological and regressive sexuality and could only be countered by violently denying these excessive and contagious bodies’ life and reproductive futurity. Race and disability in both cases work strategically and conjointly to assemble the deviant subject as given to death for the benefit of the nation’s or community’s racial health.

In light of these entanglements, Ellen Samuels has foregrounded the “necessity of a fully integrated analysis that proceeds from the central understanding that race and disability are mutually constitutive and inseparable” (113). Her reading of Francis Galton’s comparison of fingerprints taken from “Negro” and “Idiot” subjects demonstrates the “impossibility of separating race from disability” (113), an assessment which the articles in this issue underscore. The eugenic episteme, in other words, prompts scholars to think the categories of race and disability as dynamic, as vectors coming strategically together to literally assemble the deviant, the immigrant, the abnormal, the dysgenic man - ace to American racial purity. Just as, according to Down, a child slips into ‘tainted whiteness’ by virtue of disability, so is the nation—and all its white able-bodied purveyors—constantly at risk of being tainted and crippled by the influx and excesses of disabled and racialized bod - ies. Eugenics in this sense always was “eugenics of risk” (Lemke 288), dealing in the logic of contagion and degeneration of a constructed ‘pure’ normalcy.

**Perspectives for American Studies Scholarship**

This special issue understands eugenics as a pervasive, enduring, and almost endlessly transforming “nimble ideology” (Ordover iix), a perspective that has been shared by many scholars focusing on the field since the 1985 publication of Daniel Kevles’s *In the Name of Eugenics*. For a long time, however, this view was not prevalent in American Studies. Discipline-defining works like Richard Hofstadter’s *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), or John Higham’s *Strangers in the Land* (1955) discussed eugenics in politics and culture at the beginning of the twentieth century by largely dismissing its importance. Its characterization as a “craze [which] had about it an air of reform” (Hofstadter 167) implied an obsolete status within a progressive history of the United States. In 1998, Frank Dikötter’s review essay lamented that the humanities had long ignored the multifarious dimensions and extraordinary appeal of eugenics to individuals of very different social backgrounds, political convictions, and national affiliations. [...] eugenics belonged to the political vocabulary of virtually every significant modernizing force between the two world wars. It was part of such widely discussed issues as evolution, degeneration, civilization, and modernity, and touched on a wide variety of emerging fields like maternity, psychiatry, criminology, public health, and sex education. (467)
When Kevles’s book was published, it was mostly historians who had spoken on eugenics, but in the past 30 years a plethora of specific entries into the subject and a rapidly expanding archive of the “multifarious” ways in which eugenics impacted American culture, politics, and society have been established. However, the field and episteme still remain marginal to American Studies as a discipline, especially in Germany. A short survey indicates a general disarticulation of eugenics from comprehensive histories of North America and basic introductions to the study of American culture: the otherwise excellent volume *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (Burgett and Hendler) excludes the topic entirely; in Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman’s important edited collection *Futures of American Studies*, eugenics appears marginally; Paul Boyer’s standard textbook, *The Enduring Vision*, devotes three paragraphs to it. Eugenics, in Hofstadter’s view, seems un-American and overcome, at least from a general American Studies perspective.

This misconception seems to be changing, as the recent publication of discipline-centric studies like Thomas Leonard’s *Illiberal Reformers* (2016) or Ewa Barbara Luczak’s *Breeding and Eugenics in the American Literary Imagination* (2016) suggests. However, the reconsideration of eugenics that this special issue proposes for American Studies owes its insights crucially to the historical and epistemological inquiries developed in Disability Studies in the past 30 years. All contributing authors to this volume acknowledge this indebtedness that any discussion of eugenics has to the burgeoning field, and the authors point to many of the landmark studies that have championed the reframing of a ‘moral detour’ into a quintessentially modern and highly pervasive episteme. Books like *The Biopolitics of Disability* (Mitchell and Snyder), *Enforcing Normalcy* (Davis), *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (Longmore and Umansky), *A Disability History of the United States* (Nielsen), *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Baynton), or the important *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (Schweik) have been instructive and pertinent in reconsidering American cultural and literary histories as shaped by encompassing ideologies of normalcy, and constructed through the demarcation of certain bodies—disabled, racialized, and *enfreaked* (Garland-Thomson, ed., *Freakery*)—as deviant.

Beyond the resources already referenced in this introduction, I will not try to unfold the immensely varied and prolific field of Disability Studies and the crucial insights it offers to our discipline, in part because Gesine Wegner’s contribution opening this issue commits to this work in an exemplary manner. Examining a pertinent discussion about eugenics between a historian and a Disability Studies scholar, Wegner traces the impasses and productive confusions that emerge when historical specificity and a positivist attention to processes past meet with an understanding of eugenics as a pervasive regime shaping what we generally understand as both ‘human’ and ‘normal.’ Following her discussion
of this exemplary dissensus regarding approaches to questions of history and continuity, Wegner elucidates the productive epistemological displacements that disability perspectives have enacted through their critiques of ‘normalcy’ (qua non-disabled) and the “ideology of ability” (Siebers) that saturates American and other lifeworlds. Wegner argues that Disability Studies reframes investigations of eugenics into assessments of how the episteme structures bodily realities to this day.

Her argument gains particular momentum when she tracks the transatlantic perspectives emerging when American disability scholars engage with the long-ignored extermination of disabled bodies in the Nazis’ Aktion T4 during the Holocaust. As Wegner argues, Disability Studies, precisely because its own history has remained “less than accessible” and obscured by ‘general’ histories of the twentieth century, are able to develop “affective epistemologies” (Wegner in this special issue) that prove not only productive but highly necessary when engaging with the transatlantic devaluation of human life afforded by eugenic knowledges and practices. In this light, the wholesale extermination of disability—both embodied and abstract—constitutes the very paradox of a ‘beginning’ for Disability Studies, a conundrum that Wegner relates to the often self-reflective and highly original prose of the field. For Disability Studies, eugenics posits ‘a past that isn’t past,’ leading to the constant renegotiation of history and the present, truly transatlantic and connective perspectives, and a radical situatedness of disabled knowledges that prove to be more inclusive than ‘general history’ can ever aspire to be. Wegner, and this special issue with her, calls specifically on German American Studies to address these transatlantic and transhistoric entanglements and, in their stark light, also make its scholarship “more inclusive.”

**Why (Re)Consider Eugenics Now?**

The selective views of American eugenic history criticized by Wegner and this issue’s other contributors might explain why it is frequently ignored that eugenics as a mode of biopolitical thought and (self)government never really came to an end in the United States—or in Germany, for that matter (Waldschmidt). The catastrophic ‘eventfulness’ of the Shoah, it seems, has likely contributed to a general understanding of eugenics as a phenomenon with ‘an end,’ thus obscuring the ‘ordinariness’ (Ladd-Taylor, “Eugenics”) of German and American continuities and their persistence in everyday culture. While from a disability perspective, eugenics must be framed as an enduring—and endlessly transforming—project, tangible, for example, in current debates about prenatal diagnostics, selective abortion, and the cut-backs of health care for people with disabilities, other scholars have tried to correct purely historical assessments with terms like “new eugenics” (Baker) or “neo-eugenics” (A.M. Smith). Nancy Ordover’s discussion of contemporary
genetic discourses on homosexuality and the “gay gene,” echoed in Ellen Samuels’s volume *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (2014), leads her to the insight that “eugenics is, once again, making a very public ascent” (iiv), remarking less on the resilience than on a renewed energy of the discourse.

In the recent attention to the governmental and biopolitical tenets of neoliberalism—the transformation of racial discourses under genetics, genetic management, governmental genetic responsibility, and genetic health (Lemke)—that the turn to materialism has brought, eugenics must also be reconsidered for its contemporariness. Laura Doyle touched on this issue in her extensive 2004 review essay “The Long Arm of Eugenics,” where she asks her readers: “Are you fit? A fit parent? A fit body? A fit citizen? And what does it mean if you are not? If the language of ‘fitness’ seems colloquial, if this sequence of questions feels predictable, if a ‘no’ answer seems socially unacceptable, you are feeling the reach of eugenics” (520). In this regard, we are living in eugenic times. They may not feel like the eugenics of the early twentieth century presumably felt, but they are unambiguously eugenic.

This special issue aims to provide an entryway into *American Eugenics* as a crucial part of American scientific, political, and popular culture between 1900 and 1940, but we also want to highlight it as a neglected continuity that links, for example, our ideas of meritocracy to the racial logistics of IQ testing in the early 1900s. Eugenics presents an ever-reassembling force, interpelling bodies and subjects in a complex, entangled, and enduring way as raced, classed, sexualized, and dis/abled. Discussing ‘eugenics as culture’ in early twentieth-century America—in 2019—is therefore important and timely. The contemporary mediasphere, not unlike popular culture of the 1920s and 1930s, is saturated with discourses professing eugenic thinking, and even outright reprisals of its central doctrines.

In 2017, an image emerged from the depths of the Reddit.com message boards that reiterated ideas of ‘race suicide’ and ‘white reproductive duty’ in the contemporary form of the internet meme. Accompanied by two images of a white man and woman cradling a small dog in their arms like an infant, it read: “Your great-grandmother: 12 kids. Your grandmother: 6 kids. Your mother: 2 kids. You: an abortion & a dog” (Figure 2). Like all memes, this image and sequence—dramatizing the diminishing reproductive returns of whiteness—aimed not at sloganizing, but at remaking discourse as affect. Notorious alt-right-commentator Stefan Molyneux picked up on the meme on his popular YouTube channel and applied its meaning to current migration and fertility patterns in Europe and the United States. The meme is an unmasked participation in the phantom discourse of an ‘imperiled white majority,’ connected to theories of ‘Umwolkung’ perpetrated by the German right and the conspiracy theory of the willed minoritization of white people through immigration and abortion legislation that the international far right has been pushing.
under the headings of ‘The Great Replacement’ or ‘White Genocide.’ If whiteness is supposed to ‘feel outnumbered’—as the message distributed by contemporary white nationalists such as Richard Spencer goes—this presents a mere rehash of the racial eugenic duty of the late nineteenth century, that discourse which Wendy Kline called “reproductive morality” and eugenicist Madison Grant’s bestseller *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) termed ‘race suicide.’

As these ideological and affective tenets of the eugenics era (re)emerge and persist, the Trump administration has vocalized many of them in terms of legislation and political discourse. This issue’s concluding article on Trumpian eugenics, by Susan Currell, editor of the important volume *Popular Eugenics* (2006), traces eugenic imaginaries of ‘fitness’ and ‘good genes’ in Donald Trump’s self-descriptions. Currell aligns them with the troublingly frequent devaluations of disabled, racialized, and migrant subjects that this presidency has so far leveraged. Currell’s findings are no less alarming for her attendant argument that the currency of eugenic thought in Trumpian discourse presents a by and large “make-believe” version of supremacist fantasies, untethered to science or that outdated object of politics, facts. Trump’s employment of a eugenic imaginary—from his book *Crippled America* (2015) and his allegedly “high IQ,” to denunciations of a “disability racket” or the “inborn” criminality of Mexican immigrants—proves for Currell that the popular (and now populist) narrative offered by eugenics past and present retains a high attractiveness despite its wholesale scientific discrediting after 1945. Contemporary Trumpism comfortably surfs on this enduring eugenic imaginary. Tracking it back to utopian and dystopian texts of the early twentieth century, Currell calls attention to eugenics as “the backbone of a progressive meritocracy” (in this special issue), a pertinent argument that should be considered in scholarship to come.

**Figure 2:** “You: An Abortion and a Dog.” Anonymous Meme, n.d. Web. 7 Jul. 2019. https://me.me/i/your-great-grandmother-12-kids-your-grandmother-6-kids-your-mother-17767773.
In light of these arguments, Trump’s eugenic populism presents merely one more instance of a pervasive ideology that brings together racial thinking, ableist rhetoric, economic concerns, and ideas of national progress and efficiency. The activists of NationalAdapt, the disability movement that most visibly protested Trumpian healthcare reform in 2017, have pointed out that the cutting of healthcare services, or increasing costs for the disabled and those with so-called ‘pre-existing conditions,’ will have devastating effects on many parts of the population, leading to what Lauren Berlant calls “slow death” by capitalist-competitive prioritizing, or “neoliberal-ableism” (Goodley et al. 981).

Kwame Holmes has recently made a similar argument on the racialized necropolitics of capitalism by pointing out the relation between the racialized tenets of gentrification, real estate, and housing policies, and the increasing numbers of people of color dying because of them. Citing the Grenfell Tower tragedy of 2017, where 72 citizens, most of them Black, burned to death in a London apartment complex because of highly flammable façades and the increased police presence in gentrified neighborhoods that led to the murder of Philandro Castille, Holmes makes a connection between urban planning, gentrification, and the commercial “value of Black death.” What he dubs “Necrocapitalism”—a corporatized biopolitics distributing death and vulnerability to some populations and life to others—presents a radical extension of Selma Bidlingmaier’s article on gentrification in this issue.

Along similar lines, Jasbir Puar’s recent and important monograph The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability (2017) explores the large-scale debilitation of ‘non-white’ bodies by forms of organized state violence and racial capitalism, effectively describing a form of biopolitics that incapacitates these bodies by producing conditions of reduced livability. While Puar’s book should be read critically for its overreliance on Israel’s settler politics to exemplify her theory of debilitation, it nevertheless shows that it is at the ‘mutual constitutiveness’ of disability, class, sexualization, racialization, and geopolitical location that further contemporary investigations of eugenics’ longevity need to be situated (Erevelles). The compounding axes of stigmatization, vulnerability, and debilitation that produce some bodies as expendable within current economic, social, and geopolitical orders point to a form of eugenics—the selection of beings—that is much more discreet and disarticulated than its early twentieth-century origin, but no less violent and murderous. The border between the ‘fit’ and the ‘unfit’ is being policed and defended ever more rigidly, the various gestures of mainstream representation and empowerment of raced and/or disabled bodies as ‘human’ notwithstanding. Inevitably, the motive for this special issue’s historical investigations is contemporary, as all American Studies scholarship should be. Therefore, the articles assembled herein interrogate the coming together of our eugenic historical present.
Works Cited


