“[L]ess than accessible and seriously disheartening”: Unfolding Transatlantic Eugenics in Disability Scholarship

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Abstract

As a discussion between American historian Ruth Schwartz Conan and Disability Studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson illustrates, reaching consensus on what a term like eugenics means and how it might be used accurately in contemporary discourse proves to be highly difficult. This article shows that Disability Studies methodologies enforce a reassessment of the United States’ eugenic past, and, further, that by looking at the ‘long arm’ of this eugenic ideology, Disability Studies has provided ample ground for the reconsideration of eugenic discourses of normalization and their influence on biopolitical questions of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Looking at these discourses through a Literary Studies lens, I aim to stress the importance of creative nonfiction within Disability Studies writing. Disability Studies scholars challenge academic forms of knowledge production through unconventional aesthetics and change how questions of eugenics (past and present) are being addressed in the United States and beyond.

1 Introduction

From heated discussions about genetic diagnosis and prenatal screening to questions of assisted suicide and life support: whenever eugenics are brought into the equation, the term most frequently functions as a means of accusation, subsequently leading to debates about the appropriateness of the word for current bioethical discussions. In what contexts is it justified to call a practice eugenic, and, more importantly, how do we define the term in the first place? These fundamental questions characterize an online debate about the past and present of eugenics held by Disability Studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan (Cowan and Garland-Thomson). As a specialist in the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine, Cowan defines eugenics as a social movement of
Developments made in the medical sciences include practices of genetic engineering, prenatal testing, and assisted suicide—
to name just some of the issues that are also prominently discussed in public media. Less often addressed in public discourse are the implications for disabled lives that arise from the development of stem cell treatments and the adoption of regenerative medicine. According to a 2008 article by Shelley Tremain, some of the recent and most contentious discursive objects within the discussion of these practices are “quality of life,” “end of life,” “normalcy,” “enhancement,” and “futility” (102). Mark Kuczewski claims that scholars of bioethics focus too much on debates of whether and when disabled people should be allowed or assisted to die instead of considering disabled life as it is lived (36). Indeed, conflicts between bioethicists and disability theorists often arise over the permissibility of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. Far from merely criticizing new medical treatment, Disability Studies scholars have also pointed out a reluctance to use medical developments in the treatment of disabled people. Abortion, for example, is frequently justified on the grounds of disability while treatment of medically correctable conditions can be denied on grounds of a fetus’s disability, e.g., in the case of Down syndrome. This case, as brought forward by Margot Shildrick, is only exemplary of the ways in which biomedical practice has come to operate against the disabled body (Shildrick, “Deciding” 212).

Due to its early developments in prenatal care, France is used by Cowan as a desirable example of positive eugenics. This choice seems at least surprising, considering France’s history as the first the past, which gained worldwide popularity during the first half of the twentieth century. In line with her book Heredity and Hope: The Case for Genetic Screening (2008), Cowan moves on to emphasize the divide between “negative eugenics” and “positive eugenics” that has historically been used by policymakers to differentiate between different eugenic practices (Bland and Hall 219). While negative eugenics seek to reduce certain parts of the population through measures such as immigration restriction, institutionalization, sterilization, and ethnic cleansing, the term positive eugenics refers to discourses and measures of normalization that seek to supposedly optimize the genetic progress of a population. In light of current biopolitical discussions that arise from far-reaching developments made in the medical sciences (see Kuczewski 36-44; Tremain 102; Goering 126-29; Shildrick, “Deciding” 212), it seems striking that Cowan explicitly accuses practices of ‘negative eugenics’ of having “give[n] eugenics a bad name” (Cowan and Garland-Thomson). By not simply condemning these practices but by purposefully alleging that they have brought eugenics into disrepute, Cowan legitimizes practices of “positive eugenics.” While advocates of eugenics in the twentieth century certainly tried to enforce their ideas through the implementation of very different practices that cannot and should not easily be equated, all of these practices—positive and negative eugenics—were rooted in a strictly evaluative logic and the idea of human selection. Early twentieth-century publications such as Caleb William Saleeby’s Parenthood and Race Culture: An Outline of Eugenics (1909) draw attention to the fact that, from its early stages, positive and negative eugenics were understood to be different sides of the same coin, following the same principle: “one [positive eugenics] would seek to encourage the parenthood of the worthy, the other [negative eugenics] to discourage the parenthood of the unworthy” (172). Eugenics in its entirety has always had, as Philippa Levine and Alison Bashford assert, “an evaluative logic to its core. Some human life was of more value—to the state, the nation, the race, the future generations—than other human life” (3-4). In reducing her analysis to concentrate merely on the differences between negative and positive eugenics, Cowan neglects to acknowledge the shared politics of normalization that underlie both types of practices as well as their mutual goal of regulating populations.

In conversation with Cowan, Literary and Cultural Studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson sheds light on this problematic divide as she ultimately uncouples eugenics from its historical usage related to the Nazis. In contrast to her counterpart, she understands eugenics more broadly as a “way of shaping human communities or shaping human populations” (Cowan and Garland-Thomson). In redefining eugenics as a specific, culturally determined mode of thinking about community, Garland-Thomson destabilizes Francis Galton’s original understanding of eugenics as “the science of improving the human stock through selec-
tive breeding” (Galton 24-25). Instead of understanding eugenics as a rational, semi-scientific mode of thinking about different bodies, a relic of the past, Garland-Thomson refers to eugenics as a complex biopolitical regime. She rejects the claim that eugenic ideas and practices can only be considered as phenomena of the past:

Although eugenics itself—the word, as you well know and have pointed out—comes from a very specific history within the development of medicine and science, in some sense what we might call eugenics—that is to say the shaping of human communities—has been practiced in lots of different ways over the course of history. (Cowan and Garland-Thomson)

While the scientific character of eugenics has long been discredited, it is precisely this discrediting of eugenics after the Holocaust that has led scholars of American Studies and other fields to miss the continuous impact of eugenic ideology on American and other modernities. For Garland-Thomson, eugenic thought and its prevalence in contemporary thinking raises the question: whom do we talk about when we conceptualize the “human” and its place in different socio-cultural settings, past and present? The notable tension and disagreement between Garland-Thomson and Cowan—and by extension between Disability Studies and traditional research in History—are emblematic for discussions about eugenics, which frequently seem to generate more questions than they are able to answer. Failing to find a shared language with which to define eugenics, their discussion further illustrates that, thus far, no consensus can be found regarding a definition of “eugenics” and how the term relates to contemporary discussions in bioethics. Reaching far beyond questions of mere terminology, such discussions make differences between the embodied epistemologies of Disability Studies, on the one hand, and the seemingly disembodied epistemologies of traditional studies in History, on the other hand, blatantly clear. Last but not least, Cowan and Garland-Thomson’s eager debate as well as the scholarly responses to it by Rachel Adams, Paul A. Lombardo, Marisa Miranda, and Gustavo Vallejo reveal what it means to engage in conversations about eugenics and its continuing presence in contemporary culture: it frequently requires scholars to perform both intellectual and emotional labor. This holds particularly true for those who might inevitably come to justify their own existence as scholars and people with disabilities within these controversial debates.

In the following, this article sets out to show that Disability Studies methodologies enforce a critical reassessment of the United States’ eugenic past. And further, looking at this “long arm” of eugenic ideology (Doyle 520), Disability Studies has provided ample ground for the reconsideration of eugenic discourses of normalization and their influence on biopolitical questions in the late twentieth and twenty-first century. Looking at these discourses through a Literary Studies lens, I aim to stress the importance of creative nonfiction within Disability Studies
This truism has recently been challenged by Jasbir K. Puar. In *Right to Maim*, Puar argues that, depending on our circumstances, we will not all be disabled. In fact, the risk of death precedes the chances of becoming disabled for some marginalized groups. Puar’s argument provides a crucial intervention in dominant Disability Studies discourses and urges the field to consider some of the privileged positions that have shaped said discourses. At the same time, pointing out the given possibilities of a person becoming disabled remains important as such a reminder stresses the fluidity of disability.

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2 The Ideology of Ability and the Gain of Disability (Studies)

While Rosemarie Garland-Thomson urges us to question past and present conceptualizations of the human, fellow Disability Studies scholar Tobin Siebers encourages us to rethink future visions of the human celebrated in Western culture. If history reveals one inescapable truth about human existence, Siebers asserts, then it is the fact that human beings and the world they inhabit are fragile (“Complex Embodiment” 278–79). Visions of a future in which we triumph over illness and disability indeed seem to contradict one of the prevalent lessons that history teaches us about the unpredictability of natural catastrophes, epidemics, and mass injuries afflicted by human hands, as well as about their consequences. Yet even without such large-scale events, all humans, as Susan Sontag aptly reminds us, hold “dual citizenship” in what she calls “the kingdom of the well and [...] the kingdom of the sick” (3), a finding that also holds true to our experiences of disability. One central truism of Disability Studies scholarship has thus been the acknowledgment that, if we are lucky to live long enough, each one of us will become disabled at some point in life (cf. Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability” 5; Siebers, “Disability in Theory” 176; Brueggemann, “Disability Studies” 284; Bolt, “Introduction” 1). In line with this logic, we can observe that American culture indeed abounds with experiences of disability—a fact that has often been overlooked in American Studies. According to the latest census, Americans with disabilities make up over 56 million people and thus present the largest minority group in the United States (Brault 4). In light of these numbers, one of the most crucial tasks of Disability...
Studies has been to move beyond an imperative to cure non-normative bodies and to rethink disability in its most simple definition as part of human life. Furthermore, Disability Studies critiques common understandings of disability as loss, shedding light on the gain or advantages that people with disabilities bring to society (Garland-Thomson, “My Orphan Disease”). In stark contrast to medicalized and psychologized notions of disability and illness, Disability Studies relocates disability to social, cultural, economic, and political realms (Goodley 84). Instead of promoting the mere tolerance or acceptance of bodily differences, the interdisciplinary field calls for an appreciation of disability as a positive identity category, an embodied experience that also enriches scholarly practices (Bolt, “Enabling the Classroom” 562). I propose that this very premise of Disability Studies—to not think of disability in terms of loss but in terms of gain—challenges the eugenic mode of thought at its very core. By moving its primary focus away from the embodied materiality of impairment to the socio-historical construction of the non-normative body, Disability Studies further reverses some of the underlying assumptions with which eugenics operate. It is not the body that needs to be optimized to shape a desirable future for the individual and society, but the social environment—both physical and attitudinal—that needs to be changed to accommodate human variation. In replacing the medical model with social-model approaches to disability, culture has been revealed to be the driving force in how we understand physical differences. Such recognition forces us to reconsider the naturalizing effects with which medical sciences have talked and continue to talk about the body and experiences of disability—falsely equating the latter with notions of suffering and pain.

By exposing American culture’s general dependence on an “ideology of ability” (Siebers, Disability Theory 7), Disability Studies has revealed the close and frequently dangerous entanglement of Western notions of modernity with utopian fantasies of a society in which disabled bodies no longer exist (Mitchell and Snyder, “The Eugenic Atlantic” 85). Transgressing national borders, the improvement of the human body seems to function as one of the most long-lasting, common denominators of negotiations of utopia in Anglophone literature (Parrinder 67). While classics of American literature such as Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time (1976) have imagined a future world which values different genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, disability remains a feature of human variation that—even long after the peak of eugenics—has been eliminated within utopian visions of the future (Kafer 221). Ever since the 1930s, eugenic writing in American popular culture, in line with the eugenic literature of its time, has increasingly contemplated visions of “a world without bodies” (Troshitz 52-53).8 In an attempt to steer attention away from present insecurities, such visions have frequently been used to create illusions of a secure, predictable future (Cogdell 203). In the last 15 years, Disability Studies scholars, among them most prominently lit-

8 In one of his lectures at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault proposed that utopia “is a place where I will have a body without body” (229). Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell use this notion of a “world without bodies” as a title for their 2001 documentary, in which they effectively illustrate the fatal consequences of such thinking for the lives of thousands of disabled people during the existence of the Third Reich.
erary scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, have put considerable effort into shedding light on the ubiquity of eugenic assumptions in contemporary U.S. culture. Tracing the history of eugenics, Mitchell and Snyder have revealed that, though different in shape and intensity, contemporary discourses of the non-normative body are based on eugenic ideas and their persistence within American culture since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (“The Eugenic Atlantic” 844-47; *Biopolitics* 125-27).

According to Christina Cogdell, one of the reasons for the early popularity of eugenics in the United States was the allure of control, both over evolutionary progress and over the future (5). Yet far from being disenchanted, the appeal of control continues to generate what Garland-Thomson calls a “cultural logic of euthanasia” (“The Cultural Logic” 779), producing certainly different, yet complementary, sets of practices that American culture directs at disability. These two sets of practices are based on the assumption that disability is either something that can be overcome or something that takes away all quality of life. Far from merely questioning or criticizing practices of assisted suicide, Garland-Thomson uses the notion of a “cultural logic of euthanasia” as an umbrella term to denote a general “mode of thought manifest in particular notions of choice, control, happiness, and suffering” (“The Cultural Logic” 779). In an effort to distinguish contemporary practices such as selective abortion from eugenics’ historical roots, scholars in other fields have, in the meantime, followed very different directions. In line with neoliberal consumer culture, philosopher Nicholas Agar suggests thinking of contemporary practices as “liberal eugenics” and emphasizes the individual choice that modern medicine grants its patients through reproductive technologies (148-49). While feminist Disability Studies scholars like Garland-Thomson by no means speak against women’s reproductive freedoms and the importance of choice, the field draws attention to the ideology of ability that culturally shapes such decision-making processes, locating them outside the realm of the individual. As Margrit Shildrick demonstrates in her 1997 book *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics*, Disability Studies is able to enrich discourses of pro-choice feminism, as it stages important interventions with regard to the movement’s frequently ableist undertones (23).

Such a critical Disability Studies questions the meaning of core American ideas such as “independence” and “freedom” in order to not only highlight the socio-cultural construction of disability but to further disclose the ablest fictions that underlie American culture. While disability is still predominantly seen as a medical matter in American culture (Brueggemann, “Disability Studies” 283), ability can be attributed to an almost endless list consisting of talents, intelligence, and physical strength, which can, in turn, be related to ideas of a human essence. Such “ideology of ability” (Siebers, *Disability Theory* 7) not only enforces...
a clear preference for able-bodiedness but places ability as the baseline by which individuals become intelligible as human beings. That some disabled bodies are imagined in American culture as redeemable while others are considered disposable reveals, as Tobin Siebers remarks, “the fact that we are always dreaming about it [ability] but rarely thinking critically about why and how we are dreaming” (Disability Theory 9). Put differently, Disability Studies invites us to critically reflect on how we define suffering and visions of a supposedly better future.

Looking at the broader historical developments of the last century, we can detect a definite shift from the state interventions practiced as part of negative eugenics in the twentieth century to a belief in self-surveillance and self-quantification that dominates American culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. At the current moment, ideas ranging from the control of nutrition, to tracking of physical exercise and sleep, to health check-ups and screenings are indicative of the United States’ ever-growing “imperative for healthy living” (Nettleton 1). Enforced through new technologies, this “imperative for healthy living” follows the same principles of controlling the future through the control of one’s body that early eugenics advertised in contexts of both personal and “race hygiene.” During the 1934 Chicago World’s Fair, for instance, visitors would learn the essentials about their own bodies primarily to be made aware of “the relation of those bodies to the greater body politic” (qtd. in Cogdell 87). To put it differently, the lessons of both self-enhancement and the enhancement of populations are historically deeply intertwined and part of a more extensive network that developed across transatlantic borders. World’s Fair committee members would travel to Germany to purchase copies of exhibits such as the Transparent Man. First at display at the Deutsche Hygiene Museum in Dresden, the Transparent Man stood on a raised podium at the center of the World’s Fair to teach visitors about the alleged standards of the human body (Cogdell 87). Today, complemented by a Transparent Woman as its counterpart, the display continues to be a popular exhibit in German and American museums. While such displays indeed provide valuable knowledge of the body, they continue to enforce standardized ideas of the body as non-disabled and young. However, rather than pointing fingers at individual institutions, the popularity of the Transparent Man and its history serves to illustrate the extent to which contemporary notions of the human depend upon the normalizing discourses developed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

3 Disability as Default Category for Human Intelligibility

While we have come to understand categories of race and gender as culturally constructed, disability continues to be used, as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder remark, as a “default category of ‘real’ human incapacity” (“The Eugenic Atlantic” 851). In a culture that idolizes physi-
cal strength, beauty, and intelligence, disability is to be avoided or fixed, or, as a reminder of human vulnerability, comes to signify the “Other” that constitutes dominant culture. While disability shares this position with other marginalized identity categories (Brueggemann, “Disability Studies” 283), Lennard Davis cautions us to note that disability is a shifting notion of identity that distinguishes itself from other identity categories in that it has not developed “a certain rigidity in definition” (35). For Davis, disabled people are the ultimate intersectional subject, a universal image and important modality through which we can understand processes of exclusion and resistance. Indeed, the idea of biologically inferior bodies not only preceded the belief in a racialized and therefore inferior body but gave justification to such a racialization in the first place (Ervelles 40; Mitchell and Snyder, “The Eugenic Atlantic” 847). As Jasbir Puar argues in *The Right to Maim*, disability has been used to police and institutionalize racialized bodies from the time of slavery to the current prison-industrial complex (38). Looking back at the racist past of the United States and Canada, such markers of disability are indeed omnipresent. In 1920s Canada, state officials like Helen MacMurchy argued for stricter immigration laws on the basis of immigrants’ mental health: “The number of recent immigrants that drift into institutions for the neuropathic, the feeble-minded and the insane is very great” (qtd. in Strange and Stephen 529). Questioning the suitability of such immigrants for the nation, MacMurchy conceals her demand for stricter, clearly racialized immigration policies by using the language of disability. She emphasizes a supposedly inherent tendency of these immigrants to become “feebleminded” and thus marks these groups’ bodies as biologically inferior. In doing so, disability becomes once more naturalized. On the one hand, MacMurchy uses these naturalized categories of mental disability to socially construct certain immigrants as the ultimate “Other.” On the other hand, the report fails to consider the conditions that disable these immigrants in the first place and that might indeed have caused some immigrants to acquire a mental or physical impairment. As becomes evident in reading this account, a dominant ideology of ability is here clearly used to legitimize the actions of a racist system.

In many ways, white culture did not only project, as Mitchell and Snyder argue, its own “prehistory” and a lack of modernity onto people of color through using disability (“The Eugenic Atlantic” 848), but also conflated disability with a pre-modern state to further enforce the illusion of a non-disabled future for Western societies. As the previous account illustrates, the conception and construction of racial differences often relied on mental and psychological diagnoses. Author of *The Almost: A Study of the Feeble-Minded* (1920), Helen MacMurchy indeed served as Canada’s first official “inspector of the feeble-minded” (Strange and Stephen 527). Immigration issues being one of MacMurchy’s concerns, the title of her position as “inspector of the feeble-minded” is
more than striking. The title reveals that not only have “denominations of bodily difference [...] been incorporated into racial and other hierarchies” (Quayson 176), but that notions of disability were used as the basic terminology on which racial hierarchies were built, justified, and, to certain extents, concealed. It is important to note that, as Nirmala Erevelles reminds us in Disability and Difference in Global Contexts, “the conceptualization of black subjectivity as impaired subjectivity is neither accidental nor should it be conceived of as merely metaphorical” (40).

Instead of being metaphorical, Black bodies become disabled bodies in specific moments in history. In his analysis of the history of Ellis Island, Jay Dolmage emphasizes the role that categories of disability played in the alienation of racial groups and individuals in the United States. As in Canada, “feeblemindedness” and “regression” became the dominant notions used by U.S. officials in their endeavor to restrict immigration. In turn, people with disabilities became increasingly and continuously stigmatized through processes of racial selection: “[a]t Ellis Island, the categories of defect and disability that adhere today were strongly grounded if not created, as was the diagnostic gaze that allowed for the nebulous application of the stigma of disability as we know it today” (Dolmage 26). In the context of U.S.-American slavery, categories such as “dysaesthesia aethiopica” and “negritude” were used to “diagnose” laziness and a mild form of leprosy in Black people (Stuckey). That disability appears to be a common denominator in these different historical accounts points to a key conflation of ableism with nation-building processes, something that Mitchell and Snyder—with a detour to Puar’s important notion of “homonationalism”—have called “able nationalism” (Biopolitics 113). While the history of white disabled people certainly differs from the histories of the various (disabled and non-disabled) groups of Color who immigrated to or were forcefully brought to the United States, their shared social marginality occurs through references to the disabled body as that which automatically disqualifies individuals from participation in society (Mitchell and Snyder, “The Eugenic Atlantic” 851). In this process, a range of very different bodies were turned into undesirable “Others.” Bodily traits and thus the language of disability served as a primary tool for making individuals or entire groups unintelligible as human beings.

As one of the master tropes of eugenic endeavors, “feeblemindedness” not only came to produce racialized bodies but was also used to portray certain classed, gendered, and sexualized bodies as useless or even harmful to the future of the nation. In 1907, Indiana was the first state to adopt sterilization laws as a central measure against the “menace of feeble-mindedness” (Bashford and Levine 18). In addition to its many disabled victims, such legislation allowed for the forceful sterilization of poor people based on their extent of “dependency” and for the sterilization of women considered too promiscuous (Cohen 6). Records show that by the late 1920s, forced female sterilization indeed surpassed the
number of coercive sterilizations practiced on men (Largent 21). Next to female promiscuity, homosexuality among women and men was treated by sterilization under the pretext of treating mental disability. In 1953, Karl Bowman and Bernice Engle argued in the *Journal of Social Hygiene* for the “therapeutic castration” of gay men, explicitly referencing the success of such practices in a number of European countries, among them the Netherlands and Switzerland (Largent 21). Ongoing practices of conversion therapy in the United States, advertised by studies that continued to be conducted by some high-ranking psychiatrists until the beginning of the twenty-first century (Ritter), indicate the dangerous effects that eugenics have had on contemporary “scientific” findings.

The previous accounts are exemplary for the enactment of sterilization laws across thirty-two states of the United States, continuing well into the second half of the twentieth century and leaving more than 60,000 people, many of them women of color, unwillingly sterilized (Lewy 265-67; Schweitzer 16). The public support of such measures shows how eugenic ideology had spread far beyond the realm of academia and scientific discussions. Familiarized with eugenics through local lectures, many Women Clubs across the United States would not only discuss the need for marriage laws and baby contests but also openly considered passing resolutions in favor of forceful sterilization (Cogdell 101). Far from being only the work of individual scientists, reformers, and politicians, eugenic ideas were infused within all areas of white middle-class culture. Sterilization laws were supported by universities like Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Princeton; financial support came from institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation and influential industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie, who invested a total of 12 million dollars in the cause of eugenics (Schweitzer 15-16). What the accounts of enforced sterilization under the pretext of treating mental disability and the popularity of these practices illustrate is that, for the general (white) public, notions of disability as they relate to medical diagnoses were able to gloss over the racial and gendered implications of these practices.

### 4 Disability as Transnational Modality

Thinking about eugenics, we can understand disability as a modality that transgresses national borders. Disability served as a primary catalyst for international collaboration within a space that Mitchell and Snyder, borrowing from Paul Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic, have called the “Eugenic Atlantic.” On the one hand, modern nations decided individually on measures such as institutionalization and sterilization to dispatch their disabled and deviant populations. On the other hand, the ideas for such measures derived from a complex web of supposedly scientific as well as popular discourses that spun itself across the Atlantic Ocean. Within this Eugenic Atlantic, eugenicists in the United States belonged to the strongest foreign supporters of Nazi race policies (Kühl
Less than accessible and seriously disheartening

The Nazis made use of various popular media, ranging from exhibitions, to films, newspaper, and radio, to, as Reichs minister Joseph Goebbels demanded, “hammer [the eugenic idea] into the head of every single person” (Böhm 54; trans. Weigner). Particularly among children, songs and poems such as “Dein Erbgut hast du von deinen Vätern” (your genetic inheritance derives from your fathers) would be used to playfully teach eugenic ideas from a very early age (56).

Only a few months after Hitler’s inauguration, the Nazi government launched its strict sterilization law, “Gesetz zur Verhütung Erbkranken Nachwuchses” (Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring). Between 1933 and 1945, approximately 400,000 people were forcibly sterilized in the Third Reich. On June 26, 1935, the law was expanded to also allow for coercive institutionalizations. As a result, an estimated 30,000 abortions took place without the consent or knowledge of the women involved (Böhm 47).
tion science and psychiatry (82-83). On the basis of their analysis of editorials published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* from 1930 to 1945, André N. Sofair and Lauris C. Kaldjian conclude that the alliance between the American medical profession and the international eugenics movement was far from short-lived (312). While the relocation of eugenic authority onto population science and psychiatry was based on the opposition to the totalitarian Nazi regime and its affiliation with eugenics, an extensive critique of Nazi eugenics failed to materialize (Mehler 289). By adopting a catalog of ‘defective’ conditions, transatlantic eugenics, whether disguised by other supposedly scientific practices or operating in the open, was characterized by its shared campaign of biopolitical targeting, attempting to permanently eliminate specific bodily differences in Europe and North America (Mitchell and Snyder, “The Eugenic Atlantic” 845). Disability thus became a shared target as well as a common modality through which transatlantic eugenics operated.

American sterilization laws and their adoption by Nazi Germany vividly illustrate that eugenic ideas were long prevalent within American society and continued to shape actions well after the end of World War II. The lively exchanges between German and American eugenacists far into the 1940s reveal that even between countries that were active military enemies at the time, scientific and cultural agreement about the harm caused by disabled people to the human cause continued to blossom as a unifying ideological formation (“The Eugenic Atlantic” 846). Even after the outbreak of the war, famous American eugenicists such as Lothrop Stoddard visited Germany and met with high-ranking German officials such as Heinrich Himmler, Joachim Ribbentrop, and even Adolf Hitler himself (Kühl 61). Perhaps more than anything else, Hitler’s personal correspondence with American eugenicists reveals the importance that these eugenicists held for the propagation of race policies in the Third Reich (86). In turn, the first-hand information that eugenicists, as well as journalists like Shirer, carried home from their visits to Germany shaped the image of Nazi race policies in the United States. This image stood in direct contrast to the negative reports brought by Germans coming to the United States to seek refuge from the cruel and destructive measures of Nazi policy (63). Such discrepancies in reporting and the clear privileging of medical views highlight the extent to which disabled people were effectively held back from participating in and shaping discourses on their own bodies.

Resisting these exclusionary practices, scholarship generated in Disability Studies teaches us the value of the diverse perspectives those targeted by eugenics bring to the table. Yet it is precisely these perspectives, as Emmeline Burdett reminds us, which have too often fallen into oblivion—frequently in an attempt to hold on to scientific standards that do not allow the personal and the professional to mix (45-46). Historically, knowledge about illness and disability has been divided into two
categories, the subjective on the one hand and the objective on the other hand. Individuals’ qualitative perceptions have clashed and quarreled with medical data and ostensibly more accurate observations about their bodies (Morris 39). All too often, they have been silenced and kept from the public and political realms. Disability Studies is based on the contention that the exclusion of disabled people, and thus their social location, creates “identities and perspectives, embodiments and feelings, histories and experiences […] that offer valuable knowledge about the powerful ideologies that seem to enclose us [disabled people]” (Siebers, “Complex Embodiment” 279). In this vein, Disability Studies questions and problematizes how knowledge about disability and illness is gathered and circulated.

This profound reassessment vanguard by Disability Studies also holds true for the scholarship on eugenics pioneered in this field. As will be shown in the following sections of this paper, research on eugenics in Disability Studies often oscillates between the personal and the professional. Acknowledging the function of disability as a transnational modality, Disability Studies scholarship has become increasingly international in its efforts to reconstruct and retell disability history. Since the early 2000s, scholars from the United States have been working closely with German Disability Studies scholars such as Theresia Degener, Anne Waldschmidt, Heike Raab, Rebecca Maskos, and Swantje Köbsell. Such transatlantic cooperation is indeed necessary to make knowledge available and accessible across the Atlantic. After all, research on eugenic history through a disability lens is frequently impeded by issues of inaccessibility, most profoundly by a lack of physical access to specific historical sites and material. Furthermore, much of the German literature on eugenics has not yet been translated into English, creating additional linguistic barriers. Collaboration between German and American scholars has thus been crucial for the success of research in both countries. Such collaboration materializes not only in traditional academic output (e.g., the Disability Studies Quarterly published a special section on Disability Studies in German-speaking countries in 2006), but also takes on more creative forms, as evidenced by documentaries such as Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell’s A World without Bodies, which I will return to shortly. What these various types of German-American collaboration demonstrate is that research on non-normative bodies and eugenics requires scholars to look beyond national borders. Due to disability’s function as a transnational modality, such collaborative approaches are required to truly disentangle the intricate web that developed within the Eugenic Atlantic.

5 Reading and Writing T4

As a result of transatlantic scholarship on eugenics within Disability Studies, German-American research on T4 has multiplied since the early 2000s. The term “T4” refers to the program of systematic murder
that was carried out on disabled adults in the German Reich between 1940-1941. The central planning staff of the program was located at the titular Tiergartenstraße 4 (T4) in Berlin (Böhm 59). Up to the official end of the so-called “euthanasia” campaign in August of 1941, 70,273 people were murdered (Böhm 101). The released personnel and parts of the killing technology were directly relocated to the East. Carried out in six psychiatric clinics and nursing homes in Brandenburg / Havel, Bernburg, Hartheim / Linz, Pirna-Sonnenstein, Grafeneck, and Hadamar, the T4 murders served as personal, conceptual, and institutional bases for the mass killings that later took place in the extermination camps (Böhm 111). In the meantime, the mass murder of disabled adults in institutions through indirect methods of killing (e.g., starving, over- or under-medication) and the “euthanasia” program for children continued. During this phase of “wild euthanasia,” approximately 200,000 more people were killed before the end of the war (Hechler).

As the most drastic and fatal consequence of ableism, the T4 program is discussed in an impressive number of scholarly articles, book chapters, documentaries, and online blogs produced within Disability Studies. Disability Studies writing on T4 frequently challenges academic forms of knowledge production by utilizing unusual aesthetic forms and different media as well as by mixing personal and professional, non-fictional and fictional, and non-biographical and biographical forms of writing. In doing so, Disability Studies writing on T4 has changed how questions of eugenics are being addressed in North America and beyond. Transatlantic Disability Studies scholarship on T4 has generated a new awareness of the systematic arrangement of the T4 murders and their profound role within the enforcement of further mass killings during the Holocaust (Fries, “The Nazis’ First Victims”). Further, such writing frequently challenges the singularity of these mass killings by revealing the prevalence and transnational acceptance of eugenic knowledge and practices at the time. In the context of this scholarship, the sites where the T4 program was carried out serve not only as a reminder of past horrors but as a shared point of departure, a communal space of remembrance from which transatlantic cooperation derives.

Repeated visits by American disability scholars to various T4 sites speak to the success of such cooperation, including research excursions by Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Georgina Kleege to Schloss Hartheim (Brueggemann, “Hartheim”) and visits by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, who have organized further educational trips to Germany and different T4 sites as part of their Disability Studies classes (Mitchell and Snyder, “T4 Memorialization”). Although not primarily pursuing academic research, the well-known writer and editor Kenny Fries is investigating the history of T4 even further. As a former Fulbright scholar, Fries is currently located in Berlin, where he is working on his new book project Stumbling over History: Aktion T4, Disability, and the Holocaust. These creative as well as
scholarly endeavors are indicative of a wide disability community rediscovering its own history—a history that transgresses national borders. As places where, initially, people experiencing a multitude of different conditions were lumped into the category of “the disabled,” T4 sites are now reclaimed as communal spaces by disabled activists and scholars who refuse simple medical diagnoses and instead embrace their disability identities. Through transatlantic engagements with the history of the T4 program, American scholars and writers have thus come to produce critical knowledge informed directly by the affective subjectivity of these works’ narrators. In their research, scholars like Brenda Brueggemann, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder openly address their own positionality within eugenic discourses. In doing so, they draw attention to the fact that, to engage in conversations about eugenics and—as in the case of T4—its ultimately fatal consequences, scholars frequently have to perform intellectual as well as emotional labor. In *A World without Bodies*, Sharon Snyder boldly states that, in talking about the T4 program as a parent of a disabled child, “I am not afraid of being accused of sentimentality.” In a similar vein, Kenny Fries openly remarks in his journalistic writing on T4 that “I have a personal stake in making sure this history is remembered” (“The Nazis’ First Victims”). Placing their embodied positionalities at the center of their work, Snyder and Fries immediately draw attention to the implications of their historical research on the contemporary lives of disabled people. The naming of the disabled subject position invites readers to sympathize with the researching subject and to enter the affective realm in which his or her research is pursued. Such an approach to writing emphasizes the fact that *ratio* and *emotio* are not separate entities but inherently connected. In the introductory video to her blog on T4, Brenda Brueggemann confirms the “intense and emotional work” that makes scholarly encounters with T4 so “logically and emotionally difficult” (“Aktion T4”). A work in progress, Brueggemann’s blog is fragmentary and, in a highly self-reflective move, questions the logic of its own narration. The very structure of Brueggemann’s blog is testament to the fact that the story of T4 is never entirely told and can never be sufficiently analyzed, provoking its readers to reflect on the gaps and leaks that accompany such research. Last but not least, Brueggemann’s initial comment draws attention to the affective subjectivity that, although often denied, underlies all academic work.

In contrast to the majority of Disability Studies writing published in Great Britain, American Disability Studies scholars openly draw on such affective subjectivity to generate knowledge.¹⁶ According to Jessica Yakeley et al., affective subjectivity can be defined as “the awareness of and reflection on our emotional responses and their influence on our work” (97). However, I would like to propose that, more than merely affecting scholarly work, the affective subjectivity present in Disability Studies writing allows for the creation of new forms of knowledge and

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¹⁶ I would like to thank Ana Bé for patiently listening to my contemplations on this paper and, most importantly, for pointing out the cultural specificity of this form of writing in American Disability Studies.
embodied epistemologies that bear resemblance to the positionalities of feminist, queer, and postcolonial writing. These affective epistemologies of Disability Studies urge us, along the lines of Gloria Anzaldúa’s popular demand for postcolonial feminism, “to move beyond confining parameters of what qualifies as knowledge” (230). Instead of employing an overly covert, non-embodied narrator in their work, much of Disability Studies writing on T4 emerges from within a great variety of disability experiences.

One such experience is introduced by Kenny Fries in his reflections on the commemoration of the Holocaust and T4. Mostly situated in the genre of life writing, Fries’s work reflects on historical research, Disability Studies concepts, and personal experience alike. This becomes particularly evident in his second memoir. Published in 2007, *The History of My Shoes and the Evolution of Darwin’s Theory* traces the history of Darwin’s theory by intertwining historical research on Darwin with accounts of Fries’s own life. Over the course of the book, Fries explores the history of the phrase “survival of the fittest” from its first mention by Wallace to its appropriation by philosopher and key proponent of Social Darwinism Herbert Spencer. Following the protagonist on his emotional quest to make sense of his own story, the reader is confronted with the history of how social Darwinism transformed into eugenics in the United States in the late nineteenth century. As Fries recounts his journey, he realizes that ‘survival of the fittest’ is only part of the story. Referencing Disability Studies scholar Lennard Davis, he argues that “[a] gene or an individual cannot be called ‘fit’ in isolation but only in the context of a particular environment” (*The History* 50). In the end, Fries provides an affirmative twist to his narrative by concluding that, due to their adaptability, disabled people are, indeed, “at the cutting edge of the social trend of the broader use of assistive technology” (180). His thoughts are echoed by Garland-Thomson, who argues in a 2018 article that “genetic variation is what moves evolution forward, yielding new forms that are fresh solutions to changing environments both natural and human designed [...]. The challenges of living in a world not built for us are occasions for resourcefulness and adaptability” (“My Orphan Disease”). In line with Fries’s writing, Garland-Thomson affirms experiences of disability as being of value to human evolution rather than, as presented in eugenic thinking, posing a danger to the development of humankind. This drastic rethinking of disability provokes appreciation instead of mere acceptance and is emphasized through the subjective positionality of both writers. It is through this interaction of life writing, creative non-fiction, and academic research that new ideas are brought to the forefront of Disability Studies. Disability Studies thus uses the “experiential knowledge” (Bolt, “Introduction” 1) of its writers as a productive epistemological tool. Furthermore, Disability Studies scholars reveal the normative standards and value judgements underlying other research by making their own positionality transparent to the reader.
In the context of the Nazis’ mass killings, these alternative methods are particularly important since the T4 program has widely fallen into oblivion. As a German scholar working at a university located only 15 miles from the T4 site Pirna-Sonnenstein, I am painfully aware of the lack of knowledge about the T4 program in my general surroundings. It seems surprising that, during my undergraduate studies in History at the same university, we never visited the site as part of one of our classes nor discussed “Aktion T4” in the multiple lectures and seminars I took on the history of the Third Reich. This observation is echoed by historians who have argued that until the late 1980s, even citizens of Pirna—at least those who were born after the war—knew little about their city’s historical role as a site of mass murder (Böhm 123). In light of these observations, I argue that redirecting our academic attention to this part of history requires not only traditional forms of scholarly investigation—indeed, historical research has increasingly and successfully been pursued on T4 program for years. Instead, as Disability Studies scholarship illustrates, encounters with such history from a disability perspective provide the chance of addressing the consequences and implications of the T4 program for the lives of disabled people today. By providing a disability perspective, the inclusion of life writing and creative non-fiction in academic practice can thus bridge the divide between frequently separated elaborations on the past and present of eugenics.

Due to its horrific consequences, encounters with a disability perspective on the Holocaust are indeed infrequent—Harry and Eleanor Dunai’s Surviving in Silence: A Deaf Boy in the Holocaust presenting a rare exception.  

After all, the mass murders of the T4 program left virtually no survivors. Snyder and Mitchell’s documentary A World without Bodies makes this blatantly clear: “[t]here was no liberation because none were left to liberate.” After the killing sites were rediscovered by historians, almost no personal belongings like diaries or letters belonging to the victims of T4 could be found (Hechler). Indeed, means of writing were not made accessible to many of the victims and, in the aftermath of WWII, access to publishers would have been very unlikely due to poverty and stigmatization (Hechler). It is due to this general inaccessibility, the historical marginalization of T4, and the continuing stigmatization of disabled people that, although the Holocaust reserves such a widespread remembrance in the collective memory, it is rare “that I encounter someone, a mutual academic colleague, a student, a fellow U.S. citizen who already knows about T4,” as Brenda Brueggemann notes (“Aktion T4”). Yet survivors and their narratives are important aspects of teaching and learning about National Socialism, as well as the processes of memorial politics.

In contrast to dominant commemoration practices, almost all T4 memorials in Germany were founded by non-disabled people, most often by precisely those groups and professions who had taken part in
This research has largely been driven by an interest in the workings of Nazi medicine and its violation of the Hippocratic Oath. While certainly providing important historical insights, this approach has frequently ignored the victims and failed to shed light on the prevalence of eugenic thinking outside of the medical realm and outside of Germany (Mitchell and Snyder, “The Eugenic Atlantic” 846).

The character Bishop von Galen serves as a direct reference to the historical figure of Clemens August Graf von Galen, a Bishop in Münster. Overemphasizing the protest against the T4 program (and dismissing its wide acceptance), earlier historical research claimed that the official termination of the T4 program was directly related to Graf von Galen’s critical sermons (cf. Hinz-Wessels).

In recent years, a few Anglo-American writers have also shown an interest in the history of T4. Yet their perspective frequently mirrors early historical research that concentrated on the role of the medical profession and the church-led protest against T4, and does not take the victims into account (Burdett 44-45). Such an approach is most evident in Stephen Unwin’s 2017 play All Our Children. A play about the T4 crimes, All Our Children presents its audience with the perspectives of a pediatrician, a young SS officer, and a bishop, the latter serving—together with the mother of a disabled son—as moral counterpart and compass of the play. While the characters engage in long and certainly important discussions about T4 and its moral implications, its victims are silenced once more.

It is through Disability Studies’ shift of perspective, its embodied and affective subjectivity, that its writing succeeds in breaking this silence. Although they cannot and do not try to speak for those that have been killed, Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell’s 2001 documentary A World without Bodies presents its audience with a powerful example of how Disability Studies critically intervenes in academic and public discourses on T4 and the Holocaust. The documentary’s narration and focalization through Snyder and Mitchell allow viewers to reflect on the horrors of the T4 program from a scholarly as well as personal perspective. Giving their trip to Bernburg the very telling, communal connotation of a “pilgrimage,” the documentary’s female voice-over notes at the beginning: “[w]e are thinking about how bodies like our own have been made targets for enforced rehabilitation, segregation, confinement, sterilization, and, under the Third Reich, medical murder.” From the very beginning, Snyder and Mitchell overtly draw attention to their own subject positions and the fundamental impact that questions of eugenics have on their lives. Their mere presence thus invites the audience to not only think about the victims of the past but to contemplate the potential consequences of eugenics for people with disabilities today.

Following a basic introduction to the six killing sites via a montage of historical images, the documentary refrains from immediately moving on to the T4 site in Bernburg. Instead, the first scenes of the film
follow Snyder, Mitchell, and three other people on their way to the T4 site. On their way to the site, the camera zooms in on the different advertisements along the road. While this mise-en-scène emphasizes the spatial dimensions of commemorative culture, the narrator eerily reminds the audience that these are the roads on which disabled victims were brought to the T4 killing center in notorious grey buses. The roads are given commemorative as well as metaphorical meaning. After all, the roads also seem to symbolize the historical path of eugenics, which made killings in the name of “mercy” possible. The narrative beginning and further development thus indicate that the T4 killing sites cannot be looked at in isolation—their historical roots, as well as the long shadows they cast, must be considered. The documentary further draws attention to these spatial and temporal intersections by repeatedly leaving its immediate space. Early on in its narrative development, the documentary emphasizes the fact that Americans, too, participated in two of the three stages of eugenics: incarceration and sterilization. The narrator does not shy away from remarking that, although no systematic killing took place in the United States, many disabled people died in confinement due to the harrowing conditions. Far from equating the fates of disabled people in these institutions with the T4 killings, the documentary rather sheds light on the historical continuities that have frequently been glossed over by the singularity that the T4 killings evoke as an event of systematic mass murder.

Upon their arrival at the Bernburg site, the camera focuses on the five travelers who are “mak[ing] this pilgrimage to commemorate the forgotten victims of the Nazi Holocaust.” While it functions as an educational tool, the documentary also explicitly contemplates its role within the commemorative culture of the Holocaust. Indeed, the documentary not only raises awareness of the horrors that took place in Bernburg, but the group of disabled visitors depicted reclaims a space that historically stripped away disabled people’s agency in a most cruel and fatal fashion. Two of the people featured, German psychologist Rebecca Maskos and American Cultural Studies scholar David Mitchell, show viewers around the site. Unlike in other documentaries about the T4 project, the disabled body is not merely the object of this film but becomes the active agent, the subject through which the story of other disabled people is told. This reclaiming of space can be read as a reclaiming of power by disabled people over their own history. As they move around the memorial space in their wheelchairs, the scholars become active agents whose very embodiments challenge the eugenic discourses materialized in this historical site. By including their physical presence in its final shots, the documentary invites audiences to think about contemporary implications of the Holocaust and the persistence of eugenic ideas.

Throughout the documentary, a photo montage complements the scenes featuring David Mitchell and Rebecca Maskos. This montage

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20 The documentary mistakenly mentions black buses at this point. The notorious buses, which were entirely grey, were well-known among those living near the T4 sites and were commonly referred to as “Flüsterkutsche” (Klemperer qtd. in Böhm 99).
is arguably problematic in that it repeatedly displays the naked bodies of the killing center’s victims. In doing so, the documentary further enforces an iconography of the Holocaust in which the victims exist as nothing more than a huddled mass. While the pictures indeed emphasize the extent of Nazi cruelties, the victims are, very vividly, stripped of their identities and forced to remain anonymous. Well into the 2000s, the names of the victims of Nazi ‘euthanasia’ were not mentioned at events or in texts (Hechler). Unfortunately, the fast pace at which Snyder and Mitchell’s documentary moves through these sequences of historical photographs does not allow for a personalized engagement with the victims of the T4 program. As so often happens, the victims’ personal stories, as well as their very names, remain unknown.

In a short interview-like section of the documentary, David Mitchell compares the group’s pilgrimage to the practice of African Americans visiting sites of slavery. In making this comparison, Mitchell embeds the history of the T4 program in discourses of collective trauma. In Germany, some disability initiatives like “Encounter with a Possible Past” have indeed made it their aim to travel to all T4 killing facilities in an open “confrontation with a collective trauma” (Hechler). Identifying and sympathizing with the murdered disabled people, they understand the history of T4 as their own: the very pilgrimage thus becomes a commemorative practice for them. The meaning of such a commemorative practice and the relevance of the Nazi euthanasia program for contemporary discourses in the United States is, however, highly contested. In “What the Nazi ‘Euthanasia Program’ Can Tell Us about Disability Oppression,” Hugh Gallagher concludes that connections to an American context should not be drawn (99). In sharp contrast to Gallagher’s view and in line with this article, Suzanne E. Evans argues that remembrance of the mass murder of people with disabilities during the Holocaust is indeed crucial to understanding how and why people with disabilities continue to be marginalized in contemporary society (20).

Snyder and Mitchell’s documentary invites us to reflect upon the ways in which scholars in the fields of History and Cultural Studies usually present their research. Far too often scholars are not shown as active agents, denying the impact that their individual perspectives bear on the ways in which history is told and futures are imagined. The documentary’s theme music, the 1980s experimental song “Big Science” by Laurie Anderson, further draws attention to academia’s false promise of objectivity. Using a mixture of soft percussion, existentialist lyrics, and eerily clinical vocals, Anderson’s song criticizes science for enforcing futuristic visions that merely aim at expansion. The promise of “big science” is shown to have generated a religious appeal that is not called into question. But the song’s initial and embracing “Hallelujah” of science is revealed to be unwarranted as it bears the risk of radical individualism: “[e]very man, every man for himself” (Anderson).
Conclusion: Affective Scholarship and the Embodied Knowledge of Disability

“I never know how but I must begin” (“Aktion T-4”)—so begins Brueggemann’s ongoing blog about the T4 murders. Her statement overtly draws attention to the fact that scholarly writing, like all forms of writing, adheres to the rules and limitations of narrative structure. At least in traditional media such as books and (online) journals, this narrative logic requires scholars to provide a clear beginning and the result of their scholarly endeavors. Yet perhaps more than anything else, the wide range of research on the history of eugenics illustrates that history always unfolds as a complex narrative. The research on eugenics provided by Disability Studies adds to this complex narrative in that it provides embodied perspectives used to relate transatlantic research on Germany and America’s eugenic past to current biopolitical questions. Far from neglecting discontinuities in historical developments, the field thus sheds light on the continuities of eugenic thinking in American and transatlantic thinking. In doing so, scholars like Brueggemann, Garland-Thomson, and Mitchell and Snyder have met a demand formulated by Laura Doyle, who argues that “our narratives about it [eugenic past] should take full measure of the eugenic currents” (535).

Revealing the ideology of ability that underlies past as well as contemporary American culture, Disability Studies has demonstrated how negative eugenics were able to flourish through the employment of disability terminology. As shown by the belated recognition of eugenic crimes, disability provided the perfect, supposedly scientific cover to justify racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes, as well as mass murder. The fact that many of the perpetrators of T4 crimes have never been sentenced is a painful testament to the persuasiveness and insidiousness of an ideology of ability. The missing legal consequences of these crimes further enforce the need to raise awareness of this often-forgotten history. More than a mere recognition of T4 cruelties, the act of tracing the history of disability and eugenics helps us to better understand the Holocaust’s entire system of mass murder—a system that was first established and tested through the killing of thousands of disabled people. Yet, prior to and, perhaps even more importantly, after these killings, disability serves as a default line for human intelligibility. As this article has demonstrated, eugenic pasts and presents can only be understood if we consider the crucial importance of disability for the racialization and sexualization of bodies. Put differently, by looking at disability and the construction of normalcy through the supposedly non-normative body, we are able to understand a system that not only underlies the Nazi crimes but reaches far beyond the T4 project, with eugenics underlying conceptions of modernity throughout Europe and the United States.

What the different scholarly explorations in Disability Studies have in common is that they carefully deploy their research on the history
of eugenics to reflect on the status quo. It is only in the breaking with past taboos, as Theodor Adorno once remarked, that we are truly free to shape our present. In his essay “The Meaning of Working through the Past,” he notes that “the past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken” (572). As for the far-reaching consequences of eugenics and its continuation in current ideologies of ableism, removal of causes requires profound changes in all areas of public life. To look back and demand these changes seems particularly important in the context of medical, political, and educational practices, as well as in practices of caregiving—those professional areas most deeply involved in negative eugenics. While these professions’ engagement with the history of eugenics seems crucial for the overall quality of their professional practices, discussions of the impact of eugenics on contemporary practices are frequently not a mandatory part of the respective curricula.

Far too often, the crimes committed by the Nazis are used only as a reference point in discussions of the ultimate consequences of eugenics. Yet while the horrors of the Nazi era are often referenced, they can only serve as one, albeit essential, point of departure. Erika Dyck notes that, although a comparison to Nazi eugenics is undoubtedly effective, the widespread use of eugenic practices such as institutionalization and sterilization in North America has its own history, arguably one separate from Nazi eugenics and extermination. Looking closely at eugenic practices as a more common feature of America’s past, Disability Studies has been able to define both continuities and discontinuities in these historical discourses. Memory, it has become clear throughout this paper, is not detached from its socio-cultural conditions. And far from being static, memory is constantly renegotiated as part of social and emancipatory processes, as this paper has demonstrated in the context of Disability Studies.

America’s eugenic past points at the dangers of an “anonymous” scientific discourse that neutralizes human life. By changing perspectives, scholars in Disability Studies have been able to further remove eugenics from the supposedly scientific context in which it initially developed. By bringing historical research and cultural analysis together, Disability Studies writing highlights the need to reflect on one’s own scholarly research and positioning. This writing invites American Studies scholars of all disciplines to question their specific research aims and the social conditions in which these aims are embedded. As they draw attention to affective subjectivities in their scholarship, disability scholars articulate the fact that scholarship on eugenics has too often been aggravated by physical and attitudinal barriers, making it, as Mitchell and Snyder have rightly noted, “less than accessible and seriously disheartening” (Bio-politics 15). It is through their engagement in Transnational Studies that American Studies scholars in Germany might indeed be able to play a
key role in making such scholarship more inclusive and visible to the general public.

Works Cited


